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by T. W. Ford

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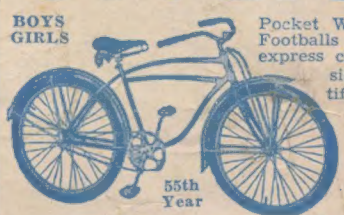

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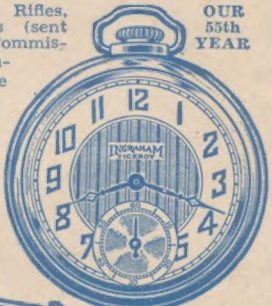

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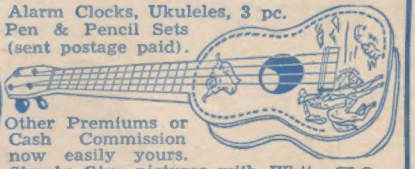

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TEN COMPLETE STORIES

Volume 11 December, 1950 Number 6

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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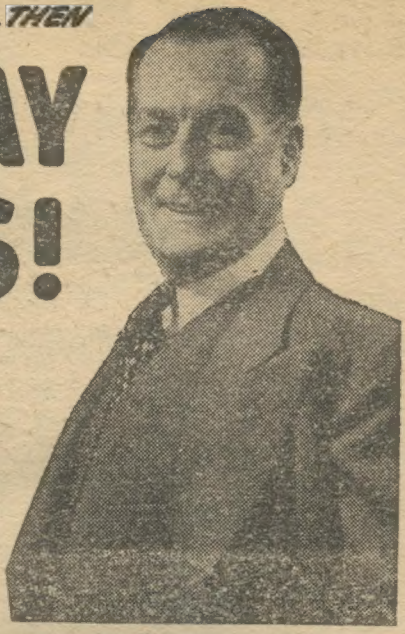

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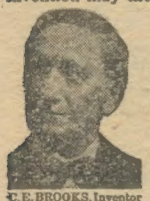

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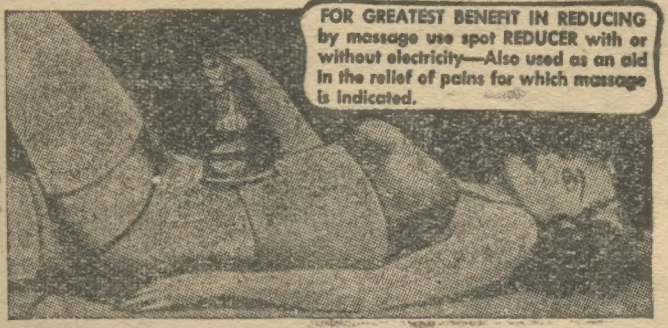

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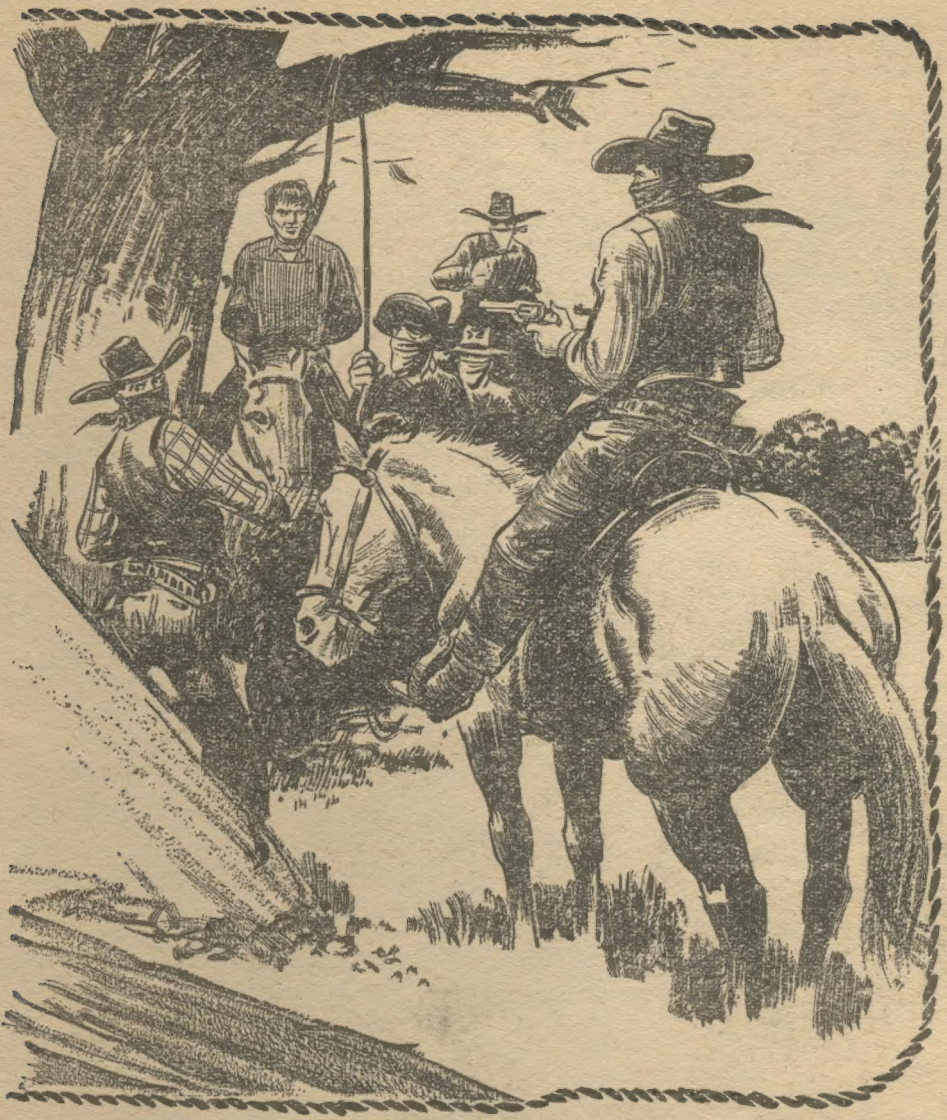
"No false moves," drawled the Silver Kid to the lynchers.

BROKEN-GUN FRAME-UP

Feature Silver Kid Novel

by T. W. Ford

(author of "Gun-Tough Bluffer")



They were out to get Bo Reban, one way or another, and Bo's half-brother, Jem, was in on the crooked deal. But Solo Strant had his own private score to settle with Jem, and a reason to see to it that Jem didn't get himself killed. For Jem, dead, was more dangerous to the Silver Kid than Jem alive . . .

THE MOON was a lop-sided lemon up there in the southwest sky above the ragged saw-toothed hills. A soft warm breeze lapped at the darkness. Further down the Ajo Valley a coyote bayed as the Silver Kid came riding down the trail that twisted out of the broken country on the east. The half-pint Kid slumped a little over the saddle horn; the night before, he'd had only a couple of hours of shut-eye after that ruckus over in Broken Gun Flats. And it had been hours since he had eaten. But the next moment he was erect and alert

in the kak, dark sleepy-seeming eyes raking the night; and one hand was fingering the tiny silver skull slung at his throat, a surefire omen of trouble in the offing.

As the paint horse moved across the little bridge spanning a creek there, all seemed peaceful, serene. A night bird twittered in a bush. But Solo Strant, the famed Silver Kid, loosened the silver stocked guns racked in his twin holsters butts forward for the cross-arm draw. He knew that strange sixth sense of his; he never ignored it.

He sloped on down nearer to the flat range of the moon-glow-bathed valley. There was the barbed wire of fenceline on his right now. The paint took him around a bend. And then he saw it: Over to his left there was a slight hollow in a clearing in the thin woodland. It was about to be the scene of a necktie party.

"Come on, come on, let's git it done with! The dirty rustler deserves a hempen necktie and he's going to git it!" It was a big bull of a man in a gray coat roaring away.

Solo Strant took in the picture swiftly. There were five-six hombres down there, all masked with bandannas; they surrounded a single doomed figure. Three of them were mounted, the others afoot, holding the end of the rope slung over a cottonwood limb. The victim-to-be was in the saddle too, his hands lashed behind him. His sombrero had been removed and the noose was draped around his neck. He was a raw-boned man, rusty-haired, with a big hawk nose. He sat impassively, face frozen, only the working muscles at the sides of his jaws telling of what he was going through.

It was all clearly etched in the moonlight that flooded the treeless space. Solo, unnoticed, could see every detail.

"One more chance, Reban," one of those on the ground said in a muffled voice. "You going to sell out your place and leave the Ajo country or do we..." He broke off dramatically. "Well, Bo Reban?"

"Not at that price," the man in the noose said in a dry drawling voice. "Nobody's a-going to drive me off!"

"Let's git it done with," the big jasper snorted. It was plain that he was nervous. He sidled his horse toward Reban's, quirt raised to give the other animal the cut that would send it bolting forward to leave Bo Reban dancing on thin air. "You dirty lowdown cowthief!"

Solo thought fast. There had been that trouble back in Broken Gun Flats; the name of Reban brought it back harshly. An orey-eyed coot who'd cleaned up a small roll at the roulette table had been waylaid in an alley on his way home. Badly knifed. Solo had come upon the scene as his assailant was taking his dinero, had jumped into the thing. But the stabbed man, going down, had blindly clawed at the Kid's legs, pulling him to his knees. The next moment the assailant had leaped by the Kid and out to the front road as men ran to the scene, drawn by the stabbed jasper's cries for help. And the tables were abruptly turned.

The knifeman, faced by the throng, had pointed back to the Kid in the alley. "He knifed him! I saw it! I tried to stop him!" he cried, figuring fast. "He cut down the old timer, the snake!"

A stranger in the pueblo, Solo was immediately suspected. He had tried to protest, but there was the knifed man's wad of dinero lying beside his feet. And Jem Reban, the hombre who'd actually done the knifing, had had friends there in the Flats. It had looked bad for the Kid for a couple of minutes till his brother, Hondo Strant, came up. Together they had held off the unorganized throng, made their escape through the back end of the alley. But the Kid was wanted by the Law for something he hadn't done.

It was Hondo who learned that Jem Reban was heading out for the Ajo country, though they didn't know which trail he was taking. Solo had decided to take the north course into the Ajo cow country itself while Hondo followed the stage road directly into the town. In that way, they hoped to put a pincers on this Jem Reban, to trap him finally and

take him back to confess to his part in the crime. And now Solo had stumbled onto this scene where a man named Reban was about to be strung up.

THE KID made his decision. Even as he sent his paint bolting into the clearing, he whipped out one of those silver-stocked Colts with the lightning-like speed of his crossarm draw. A shot crashed out, the slug whistling by the ear of the big gray-coated jasper. The Kid had missed deliberately; he hated killing, avoided even the spilling of blood whenever possible.

The bullish man's quirt dropped and he whipped around in the saddle with a shout, going for a gun with his free hand. The trio jumped away from the end of the rope as if it had been turned into a white-hot burning brand. A little bandy-legged one with a checkered shirt went for a weapon. Reining up hard, the Kid jetted the dirt beside him with another bullet. Checkered-Shirt froze.

"Easy, amigos," the Kid purred in the voice that became so deceptively velvet-soft when he was at his deadliest pitch. "No false moves—and nobody'll draw a ticket to Boothill! Otherwise though..." He walked the paint forward, the second twin weapon with a silver butt, out and cocked now too, covering them. He had the jump on them for the moment.

"Who in tarnation are you stranger?" demanded the big one, boss of the necktie party. "You're interfering with the due process of the Law!"

"Don't look like it to me," the Kid said easily, Sphinx-like face betraying absolutely nothing; "the Law don't usually have to hide behind a mask in my book."

They stared at him, a strange, small yet striking figure with an aura of danger about him. He was only a half pint of a man, wasp-waisted, boyish-faced. His was a V-shaped sharp-chinned face with dark eyes that became heaviest lidded, laziest-looking, when he was primed to strike. He had black hair that straggled raggedly over his forehead. His rig was strange, too.

He wore dusty black batwing chaps with silver conchas at the flaps. His boots were worn, cracked. Yet the spurs were fashioned from Mex silver dollars. His guns had silver butts. And beneath the black coat that hung open, he wore a black double-breasted shirt with twin rows of silver buttons. The band of his black weather-warped hat was silver-spangled, too.

But the thing that caught all men's eyes, the thing that was the last many a man had seen before he took the pasear to Hell, was the silver skull. It hung under his chin by the sombrero strings. It was small but so perfectly moulded it seemed almost alive, a grisly little thing, glittering, seeming to almost blink at times.

"Reckon better you ride on and keep your nose outa this, pilgrim," the big gent said heavily. "We can handle our own business here. It's six of us to one of you, in the bargain. We—"

The Kid was almost tricked. All the parleying had been to distract his attention. Over to the left of the clearing, the tall gopher with the bony face of a skeleton had started to edge back into the cover of the shadow. He had gone for a shoulder holster inside his coat, even got the gun out.

One of the Kid's deadly hoglegs crackled. The man screeched like a hoot owl as his weapon bounced off one of his boots. He stared at his shooting hand. There was the interblended thunder of two more shots. One was from the big gent in the gray coat; he missed as the icy-nerved Kid had already switched the well-trained paint half around. The other was the Kid's shot. It hit the big boss in the flesh of the top of his shoulder, rocking him half out of the saddle. He threw up his other arm. "All right, mister, all right," he called in a voice now hoarse with fear.

The Kid, who'd simply awed them with his incredible gun wizardry, sat there dominating the situation with his still-smoking weapons. The vic-

tim, Bo Reban, had already bolted his cayuse off amongst the trees, the loose hang rope trailing from his neck.

"All right, you danged sidewinders, put your boots in your hands and git outa here! Hit the trail—afore I lose my temper," the Kid added.

They were only too glad to pull stakes, the unmounted ones climbing into kaks, all of them driving hurriedly up the slope to the trail. As the tall bony one with a face like something out of a grave—the eyes in sunken pits, the yellow wrinkle-cracked skin taut over the practically bare bones of his face—he gave the Kid a venomous look.

"We'll be seeing each other again some day right soon—and I'll see you first, fella..." He winked, an evil wink. "And then you'll never see me—nor nobody again." That was all. He spurred on again. And he was wiping the back of his right hand on his shirt front. It left blood tracks.

Solo knew why; he had seen that hand as the man pulled up to speak. There was a shallow bullet furrow, a red groove, across the back of it. It was the Silver Kid's gun sign, his always eventually fatal bullet brand.

No hombre who wore it ever escaped subsequent death.

WHEN HE was certain they had gone on down the trail, the Kid called to the man in amidst the trees. Bo Reban came riding out, hands still lashed behind his back, the hang rope trailing from his neck. He rode right up to the waiting Kid and their eyes locked for several seconds. This Reban was a long-bodied man, shoulders slightly sloping. He had searching eyes and a hard mouth. There was no meek prayerful gratitude on that face.

After another moment, he said in a flat voice, "Mister, you did something for which I probably never can repay you. But if the chance ever comes..." He nodded slightly. That was all.

The Kid shrugged and moved around to slash the man's arms free. Reban whipped the noose from his neck as if it were a snake, spitting as he slung it to the ground. His eyes went to that silver skull at the Kid's throat: "You're that Strant fella, the Silver Kid, ain't you?" he said, recognizing the Kid by that little trinket as had so many men who'd never cast eyes on him before.

Solo nodded. "You really run off some cows like they claimed?" Then he got a surprise.

Reban nodded calmly as he offered the Kid a sack of makings. "Reckon I did; they caught me snaking a few doggies through fence. I got a few little outfit up the creek, trying to build it and hang on. I figure a couple of doggies won't be missed by them big outfits now and then. It's the only way a man making a start can git anywheres. Ain't really hurting them none," he put it bluntly.

The Kid grinned a little. He found himself liking the man somehow; there was something hard and strong about him. And Solo knew it was an age-old cow country custom, that of picking up a few doggies now and then that might belong to other people.

"T'ain't lawful, I know," Reban said as they both lighted up. "But more'n one big cow king got his start with a hungry loop and a long rope. It ain't never been considered a killing crime."

Solo Strant knew that was true, too; if a man was caught at it, he'd be punished, jailed maybe. But they didn't snake him off in the dark of night, masked, to make a cottonwood apple of him without even a trial of some sort. "They caught you taking their stuff, eh?"

Reban shook his head as he rubbed his neck where the rope had been. "Shucks, no. That big un, the leader, he's Tuck Carby. Him and his brother, Anson, they got a fair-sized outfit down the valley a piece. But they don't run much cow stuff. Got a hard-bitten bunkhouse spread, too. Some folks wonder what their real business is."

By mutual consent they had swung their horses up onto the alkali trail and headed down for the

They told tales of how the nervy Kid would walk straight into a deadly curtain of gunsmoke.

open range. Reban added that he'd been moving off a little stuff of the big Stirrup Cup when they'd nabbed him.

"Then how come they happened to catch you, Reban?"

"They must uh been trailing me and watching me," Bo Reban said. "My place has been watched, recent. Few weeks back I was almost jumped as I—well, was doing a little business under the moon. Got shot at, but got away into the brush."

The Kid nodded thoughtfuly. "Why didn't they take you into the Law? And what was that talk about giving you the alternative of selling out your place and leaving this piece of country?" The keen-witted Solo sensed there was some mystery about this thing, more than met the eye.

THEY SLOPED out of the wooded, rough country onto the swells of the open range, the broad valley bottom itself.

Reban shook his head slowly. "Seems somebody wants my little spread right bad, Strant. A spell back a stranger came out and of-

fered me a price for it, not much. My range is dang good-sized, runs well up to the north. But a lot of it ain't good grazing country, some of it in the foothills, some of it barren and sandy where she gits up close to Devil's Hump." He was referring to a sharp lone peak up at the head of the Ajo Valley. "But I aim to hang on; I want to settle down and build myself a cow outfit, a brand—something I can be proud of. I've led a rough life and some of it ain't been good."

Solo savvied that all right. He had seen other men, who'd been wild ones, decide to settle down and make something out of that thing called life. "Anybody else tried to buy your property?" he asked.

They were sitting their ponies on a wagon track road that skirted the side of the valley. A small muddy creek trickled along sluggishly beside it. Reban nodded thoughtfully, running a hand through his reddish hair.

"Tarnation, I clean forgot and left my headpiece somewhere back there... Reckon I was a might excited... Yep. Man called Turner in town. Manager of the Homesteaders Land Office. He made me an offer. Said a gent like me should pick himself up some real cowland. It was a sorta cheap offer, too; better'n the other, though." One of his work-calloused hands twisted on the saddle horn. "But I want my range. *First* place I ever owned. *First* time I weren't working for somebody else. I don't want a chunk of dinero; it always got me into trouble when I had it before. I—aim—to—keep—that—land." That powerful mouth clamped up.

The Kid could really smell skunk sweat now. He had one more query. "If anything happened to you, Reban, would anybody inherit your outfit?"

"Well, my wife'd come first. But she's from back East, don't know nothing really about running a cow outfit. She'd have to sell out."

"Anybody else—anybody who step in and run it for her?" the Kid followed up on a hunch.

Bo Reban nodded his red head hesitantly under the moon. "Well, I got a half-brother in town, Mose Litch. Good fella only he drinks real heavy... 'Course, too, if anything happened to my wife—she's very sick in bed—he'd be the next to inherit under the Law anyways. Why?"

The Kid pinched out his quirly and tossed it into the prairie grass. "Anybody else who might inherit, Reban?" he persisted, eyes sleepy lidded. "Mebbe somebody called Jem Reban?"

Bo Reban's mouth twisted in a wry smile. He nodded. "My cousin. He just got back to town. Thrown in with the Carby outfit, I think. He's in Ajo as far as I know." He hesitated a moment. "Look, Strant, he knows you're on his back trail; he's primed to cut you down on sight. He knows you're wanted back in Broken Gun Flats. It's only right I should warn you. He's a no-good ornery cuss who'd do anything for a few dollars. Riding with the Carby outfit—well, he's dangerous. Was I you, I'd git clear of this piece of country. He swore to me he'd git you if you came in."

The Kid smiled thinly. "Thanks for the information, Bo. But I reckon I can take care of myself... Now, you git home and sit tight. If I can help, I will; I got a hunch I'm buying chips against this Carby pack."

They shook hands again, Bo Reban heading north for his outfit, the Kid forking southward toward Ajo to meet his brother, Hondo, and to look up Jem Reban...

2

AS SOLO rode he did a heap of stall walking. He had two problems now. One was the matter of Bo Reban. It was plain some party craved Reban's place for some mysterious reason, that they wanted to get their hands on a rundown cow out-

fit without even much good grazing ground. And there was the matter of Jem Reban who'd done that knife-work back in Broken Gun for which Solo was wanted; The Kid had to get him and bring him back to clear himself. It was a double-barelled proposition now, he realized. Jem Reban, Bo's cousin, would be out to get him, Solo Strant, to protect himself. So long as Solo lived, Jem was in danger of being taken back for the knifing in Broken Gun Flats. Solo's mouth hardened.

He rode by a rotting toppled skeleton of framework laying beside a caved-in shack, an old oil well derrick. Further over to the east another stood leaning drunkenly beyond a swell of prairie. Solo remembered hearing that years ago Ajo had had a brief oil boom. Then the pools had run dry and it had turned into cow country...

* * *

It was forenoon of the next day when the Kid forked the paint horse into the cowtown of Ajo. Shortly after leaving Bo Reban, he had bedded down in one of the old oil-well tool sheds. Ajo was a medium-sized pueblo for a Western frontier town, a main stem with a few little side roads trickling off it. Stores and low buildings, like uneven rows of upturned boxes dumped along the former's two sides. The paint-peeling spire of a boarded-up meeting house needled at the sullen overcast sky. Ponies and rigs stood at hitch rails. A swamper was dumping a bucket of suds from the door of a ramshackle honky tonk on the left as the little Kid rode in. A gusty wind, betokening an approaching storm, whipped the alkali of the road in blinding gray waves that blurred the Silver Kid's figure as he rode along.

He found a little eating place just past the Drovers Bank, tethered his pony, and entered the mangy interior. There were a few fly-specked, oilcloth-covered tables, a rickety tiny makeshift bar at the back beside the doorway to the kitchen. The place reeked of stale grease. It creaked in the wind and an outside back door slammed as the Kid sat down gingerly. But he did crave some hot, regular-cooked grub.

"Anybody home?" he called out after a minute or so. Solo was characteristically impatient.

The door between the kitchen and the restaurant itself creaked and a fat bald man in a soiled long apron stepped through. "Want something?"

"Grub would be nice," Solo drawled.

"Have to wait a minute," the fat man said, wiping his sweating face with the apron. He took a jug off a shelf behind the bar and returned to the kitchen. The Kid had picked up his headpiece, ready to pull stakes, when the man came slouching back. He was red-eyed, redolent of whisky. He barely glanced at Solo, who, in the worn black rig, might have been some grubline rider. He blinked out the front window as Solo ordered, shuffled back.

IT WAS hawghip and cackleberries and a pot of steaming java—surprisingly good, considering the surroundings. Solo ate away as the little joint almost rocked in the wind at times. He smiled a little as he thought of his appointment at *The Creosote Saloon.* For the moment, he had almost forgotten Bo Reban and his trouble. It was at *The Creosote* he had arranged to meet his brother, Hondo, that afternoon.

There was a particularly violent gust. Out front a man's sombrero sailed from his head as if yanked

by an invisible cord. The hinges of the front door creaked under the strain. The little building trembled as if being shaken by some giant hand. And the door between the front and the kitchen jerked open a couple of inches. The wind fell off again. There was the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. Then the Kid's head came up as he heard voices and a name that rang the proverbial bell in his mind.

Apparently there was some kind of a little meeting going on back there in the kitchen. "Pass that jug this way again, Dick," a thin voice said. The speaker sounded as if he talked through his nose. "Yup. We'll git his cousin, Mose Litch. You pick a ruckus with him, Vern; that's how we'll work it."

"Sure. It'll be easy. He's always so half-orey-eyed he couldn't hit the rear end of a cow critter shooting."

"And that'll put the fear of Gawd into Bo Reban, all right," another voice added. "He'll know he'd better sell and pull stakes then. He—"

The fat proprietor's shoes squeaked as he came out, closing the door after him, cutting off the rest of it. "Anything more, stranger?"

Solo said he guessed not and dropped a bill on the table, telling him to keep the change. Nonchalantly he added, "Say, amigo, I got a little score to settle with a gopher in this pueblo. I aim to whittle him down to size. Been waiting a coupla years for the chance. Mebbeso you can tell me where he hangs his hat?"

The stout boss scratched at his hairy chest inside his sweat-stained open-necked shirt. "Mebbe. Who might this gent be?"

"Think his first name is George," the Kid bluffed, knowing he had to act fast. "His handle is Litch. I know."

The boss' red-shot eyes became vacuous moons. "Never heard of the gent, fella," he said blandly. "Don't you want no change?"

OUT ON THE street, body bent against the wind, Solo knew it hadn't been good tactics. The restaurant proprietor, for all his stupid look, had been too slick. But the Kid knew he had to make his move fast; he had wanted to try to locate Mose Litch and warn him as quickly as possible. There was no telling how fast that unseen pack would strike. As he pushed through another cloud of dust toward the dimly-seen *Creosote Saloon* sign ahead, he figured that was his best bet. Go in there and see if he could pick up any information.

It was a fairly large place, on the bare side, with the odor of stale beer hitting him in the face. It was typical: a bar counter running down on the left, some tables along the right wall. Overhead a couple of lamps were lighted against the grayness produced by the windstorm. Solo, who always gave the layout of a place a split-second check with those sleepy-looking but cat-sharp eyes of his, saw that there was a side door to the outside down on the right side of the room. Noted also that there seemed to be a couple of back rooms at either side of a narrow hall that ran on down to the rear of the two-story structure.

Up at the forward part of the bar a couple of men chatted.

As the Kid waited he was doubly glad, now, he had gone to Bo Reban's rescue last night. Besides preventing a miscarriage of justice, he had learned Jem Reban was already in town, with a bunch, and waiting for him. At least he was forewarned; now, stringing along on Bo's side, he figured to cut Jem's sign sooner or later.

"Who wants to see Mose?" a brassy voice demanded from the Kid's right. "And why?" A tall, full-bosomed woman, strong face enameled with makeup, bore down on him. She had dyed yellow hair piled high on her head above gaudy ruby earrings, matching the red dress she wore. The hand that flicked away some lint was heavily beringed. But her big glassy eyes never left the Kid, and there was antagonism in them. "Well? I'm Big Nell, the owner! Who're you and what do you want?"

The Kid swept off his sombrero

and bowed. "Ma'm, it's a pleasure. How do you do? My handle's Strant and I happen to know that certain parties aim to—"

Her rouged mouth curled in a sneer. "Reckon you're a badge-packer sneak wanting to pick him up for that trouble down at the Border! Well, I'm telling you, he had nothing to do with the gunning fracas. Nothing! He doesn't even know anything about it! Mr. Litch was right orey-eyed and—"

"I just want to warn Litch," the Kid cut in on her harsh domineering voice. And that door of one of the back rooms opened.

A slim medium-sized man came out, walking none too steadily. His hair was tousled and his face puffed from heavy sleep. He was handsome despite his condition, the black curly hair, that lean delicately chiselled face, the slanting blue eyes. His gray suit was mussed on his slim figure. But somehow he wore it with an air.

"Who's looking for me?" he mouthed surlily.

"Honey," Big Nell said, "now go back in there and leave everything to me. I'll—" It was incredible how her voice changed, cooing, how the hard look was replaced by one of adoration, as she turned to the handsome Mose Litch. Her eyes glowed. The story was plain; Big Nell loved him.

"I'm Mose Litch," he snapped, fully awake now.

"Look, Litch," the Kid started, "they's trouble a-brewing. Some gents are coming to burn you down and—"

"Who're these gents?" Big Nell demanded.

"I don't know," the Kid said, knowing how weak it sounded. "But they're out to git Litch because he's Bo Reban's half brother. Litch, you've got to git out afore—"

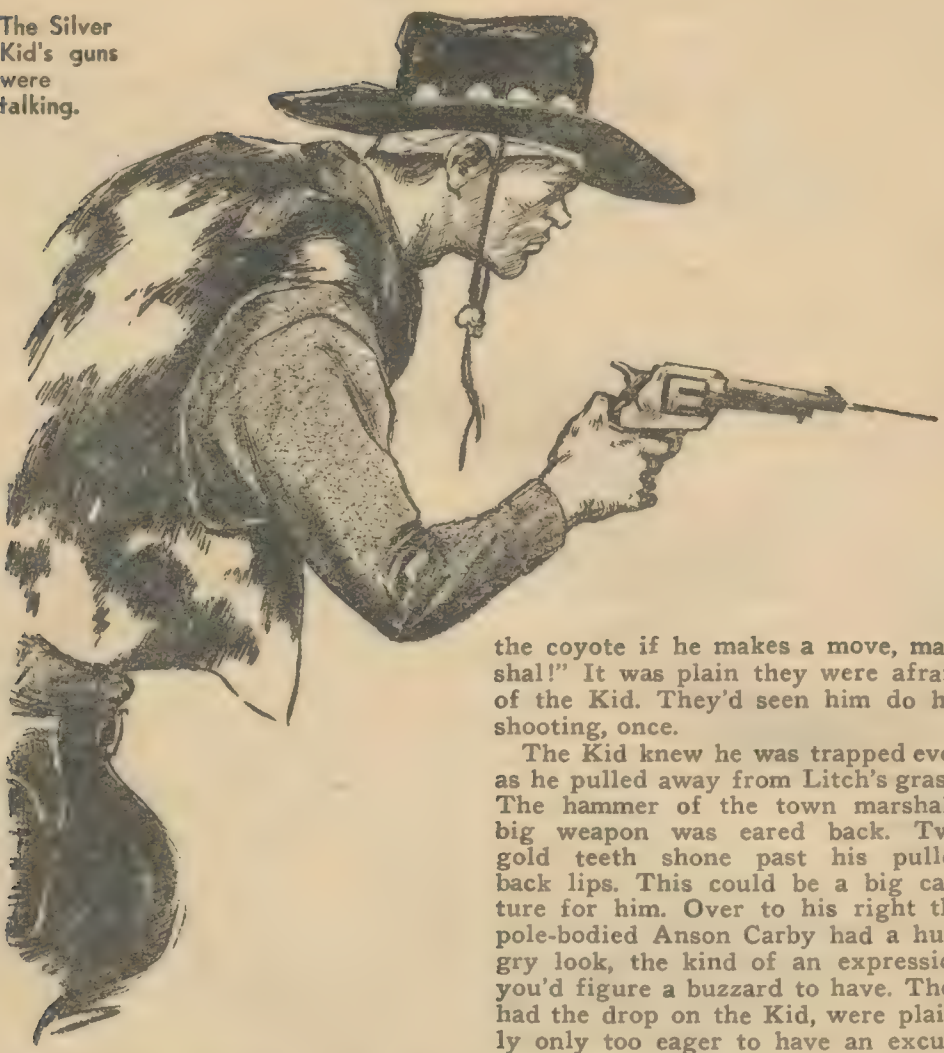
"*Who* says I gotta git out? *Who* says so?" Mose Litch flung truculently, brain twisted by the forty red in him. He hurtled himself at the Kid and started to grapple with him. "You going to throw me out, eh? You!" He had the Kid, taken by surprise, by the throat; rocked him. Solo had to twist around to see them. as he swayed on his own unsteady legs.

THE COOL Solo brought clasped hands up before locoed Litch's forearms to break the grip. And as the other lurched into him again, Solo clipped him on the side of the face with a short punch. Big Nell squeaked. Litch bent at the knees and lurched back against the front of the bar; but he still had a hand wrapped in the front of Solo Strant's black shirt as a handful of men burst in the front door. The wind eddied a cloud of street dust in with them.

There was one square-set gent with a chunk of brick-red face, a badge pinned to his vest. He was Gunson, the town marshal. He had sharp undersized eyes and a lipless seam of mouth that told the breed of hombre he was, cold and ruthless. On one side of him was Tuck Carby, left arm now in a sling. Just behind Tuck, with some of his gun spread, was his brother, Anson, the one with a face like a skeleton. There was a strip of rag around that right hand of his that bore the Kid's bullet brand. Solo figured in a flash that the John Law had come to arrest him. And he might have made a play for it. He even started for a gun.

But there was the squat bow-legged snaky-eyed jasper just ahead of the lawman, pointing at Solo. "That's him, marshal! I know him. He's wanted in Broken Gun Flats for a knifing. I'll swear to it. His name is Strant!" The speaker was Jem Reban, Bo Reban's cousin, the snake who'd actually done the knifing back there in the Flats.

With Mose Litch still clutching at him, the Kid couldn't fire without taking the risk of perhaps drilling Jem Reban. And if the man was dead, Solo could never clear himself back in Broken Gun Flats. Solo figured how it had happened: When he had taken the gamble of asking about Litch back in the eating place, the proprietor had gone back into the bunch in the kitchen and described him. Jem Reban had recognized him, of course; now the Carby bunch had switched their play when they saw him with Mose Litch.



The Silver Kid's guns were talking.

"That's him, marshal! They want him in Broken Gun!" Jem Reban repeated.

3

WHIPPING up a big Patterson Colts, Gunson charged forward. "You're under arrest, mister; we'll have to hold you till we find out!"

Bony-faced Anson Carby slid forward too, a gun in his left hand. "Drill the coyote if he makes a move, marshal!" It was plain they were afraid of the Kid. They'd seen him do his shooting, once.

The Kid knew he was trapped even as he pulled away from Litch's grasp. The hammer of the town marshal's big weapon was eared back. Two gold teeth shone past his pulled back lips. This could be a big capture for him. Over to his right the pole-bodied Anson Carby had a hungry look, the kind of an expression you'd figure a buzzard to have. They had the drop on the Kid, were plainly only too eager to have an excuse to start triggering. Solo didn't draw.

"Reckon we'll just have to take you down to the jailhouse and lock you up." Gunson said heavily. "You got all the earmarks of a gun tough to me, anyway. Elevate them dewclaws, stranger! They tell me you work for Bo Reban too."

"Reban didn't hire me, lawman," the Kid purred evenly. "And these jaspers were ready to string him up 'stead of—"

There was a soft slithering sound in a lull of the wind. A glittering shaft of steel whipped across the room toward the bar, spitted the marshal's sombrero, and ripped it from his head. It landed on the bar

counter with the black hilt of a short knife sticking out of it. The end of the blade protruded from the other side of the slashed pinch-topped crown.

All hell broke loose as they twisted toward the side door from which the knife had come. Jittery men were jumping, moving fast from their tracks lest they be the next target. Even as Solo made his draw, he had to smile thinly; he knew that knife meant Hondo had arrived...

Hondo was his brother, the brother most men didn't know he had. Hondo wore the same rig as the Kid with the same silver trimmings. He had donned it deliberately in his attempt to find Solo, hoping to attract him by it. The Kid himself hadn't known his brother was alive. Now Hondo was siding him.

ANSON CARBY bawled, from behind a post, "Marshal, the sidewinder's gitting—"

Solo's gun smashed out a one-noted song. A big splinter jumped from that post as the Kid, with that cat-like grace, backed. And he had the bewildered, still half-groggy Mose Litch hooked under the arm with his free hand. They turned their attention toward him; they had been able to see nobody outside the now open side door. The lead began to fly.

It was Big Nell who turned the tide for the moment. She jumped to the other side of Litch and helped half drag him back toward that room. The Kid's smoking weapon smashed out again and splinters flew from the floor in front of the now raging bellicose marshal. They were caught helpless for the moment, their hands tied. They couldn't fire with a woman that close, even those coyotes.

"Stand back or you'll be shaking hands with the devil afore you can spit, amigos," Solo warned, forced to raise his voice above the howl of another gust of wind. Then they had Litch, beginning to come out of his daze, through the door of the room on the side where the side entrance was.

Solo snapped another shot as the pack headed forward. At the same moment, he pushed the woman outside. "Keep outa this, ma'm; it might git real rough yet." He whipped the thin door shut and twisted the rusted key in the lock. The woman had gasped at the last instant that they could get out the back through there. Lashing lead made a sieve of that door. Litch yelped.

Solo wheeled in time to catch him. Crimson was leaking over Litch's curly black hair above one ear. What Solo had tried to prevent had occured; they had shot him. How badly there was no time to tell then. The Kid grabbed him as he rocked. But he wasn't worried about any rush coming then...

Outside, the marshal got wary. "That gent's faster 'n a snake...He'll be waiting 'hind that door for the first gent to bust through." He pulled up short, his boots abruptly nailed to the floor.

"Thing to do is to blast the door to pieces," yelled big Tuck Carby. "Then—holy sweet Jehosophat! Look out!There—" He jabbed his gun quickly at the side door of the building.

It seemed as if the apparition of the Silver Kid had appeared. But it was no apparition as was proven when the marshal reared back with a bullet-raked forearm, his own weapon dropping: Apparitions don't shoot real bullets. But it didn't appear possible the Kid could have gotten out a side window and back around to the door onto the alley so swiftly, in a mere matter of seconds.

Yet the man there was dressed in black with the same double-breasted black shirt and its twin line of silver buttons. There were the spurs fashioned from Mexican silver dollars the batwing chaps with the silver conchaed flaps, the hat with the silver-decorated band. The butts of the guns protruding from his hands were of the same metal. And under the chin of that small boyish V-shaped face, from the chin strings of the hat, hung the identical silver skull, so perfectly carved it looked alive.

It was incredible, awesome, stopping them dead for several moments. "How in tarnation—" one man start-

ed. What nobody noticed in the excitement, plus the shock of the moment, was that the figure in the side doorway was a slight bit taller than Solo Strant himself. And this hombre had round, lighter-hued eyes than the narrow-lidded dark ones of the Kid himself. It was Hondo Strant, the long-lost brother Solo never knew was alive, until he had found him about a year ago.

THE SPELL broke then. "The fool, a-coming back! Cut him down!" Gunson snorted. And a fresh gun ruckus was on.

The younger Hondo was not the walking gun devil his brother Solo was, nor did he use the famed cross-armed draw of the Kid. But he could fight, and he was no slouch when he rode that trigger. Crouched outside the doorway and almost invisible in the dim gray light and swirls of dust, his Colts muzzle spat out spikes of yellowish flame. They bit into the lighted interior. And Hondo wasn't fleeing, knowing he had to hold them at bay until his brother made his getaway. One man went down howling, hit in the leg.

Hondo's gun emptied and he whipped out a second weapon, silver butted just like the Kid's own guns. He held his unhurried methodical fire, moving back a yard, to let them think he had gone. He had already glimpsed Solo moving across the backyard, supporting the swaying Mose Litch.

"He's pulled stakes!" Tuck Carby said inside the shot-up barroom. "Go git him boys! Burn 'em down! It's legal—somebody shot the marshal, the law! Go—"

Anson Carby and two others headed forward. But just as they got opposite that side door, all hell broke loose. In the lull, outside Hondo had swiftly reloaded his first gun. He let go with both. Anson ran for the corner of the bar, a cheek nicked but not knowing how bad it was. The man with him lunged sideward and flung himself on the floor as a bullet ventilated his Stetson. Then, save for the roar of the wind, all was quiet again. Nobody wanted to try for that side door right soon again.

Gunson, the marshal, finally pulled himself together enough to get some savvy. "You—you, there, Sloane. Git out the front door and throw down on him from the front of the alley." A few moments later, with dust swirling in the open front door, they heard the crackle of Sloane's gunfire. When the latter got no shots his way in return, he ventured a little way down the alley. And he found he had been pumping lead at thin air; the jasper they took for Solo Strant himself was gone...

HONDO WHIPPED around an out-house behind the barroom, almost crashed into a rain barrel there. Under the scowling sky, the day had turned dim anyway. Added to that was the grayish foglike wash of alkali dust that drifted through the atmosphere. All objects were blurred; distances became distorted. When a fresh gust of wind kicked up a new wave of dust, rolling it along like filmy water, a man couldn't see beyond arm's length. Hondo held up. A call came from his left. He moved that way and finally made out his brother, Solo, standing in a clump of scrawny cottonwoods, with Litch's arm looped around his neck. Cries came from out front by the road.

There was no time for the brothers, who'd arranged to meet in this pueblo, to do any greeting then. "We gotta git this jasper somewhere safe—where he can be fixed up," the Kid said.

"The boarding house," Hondo said; "I got in last night and took a room there.... We don't have to cross the main drag, either. We go to our right, now." He got on the other side of the wounded Litch. Together the brothers moved him along with fair speed past the backs of the business places. But at times that wind stopped them short in their tracks.

But they welcomed it as an ally; the dust filling the air made them seem like ghostly figures, visible only from a short distance and then blurred, unidentifiable. The crashing

"Many a cowman got his start swinging a loop on his neighbor's cows!"

down of tree limbs and also store signs, the banging of shutters torn loose, had covered most of the sounds of the gunfight. When they came to the crooked side road, litle more than a wide lane, it was deserted.

Litch was weakening, his knees buckling repeatedly now. Occasionally he moaned. His eyes were closed, head wobbling, as they turned down the lane. Around a little bend, they came to the place, a large two-story house in need of a painting, *M. Murphy, Boarding House* painted on a sign over the door. They got Litch up onto the little stoop, into the musty-smelling hall. As they were starting up the stairs, a woman called from the rear:

"Who's there, now?"

"It's just me, Hondo Strant, Matilda," Hondo answered. Solo's brother had that knack, with his easy smile—unlike the Kid's own poker face—of getting people to like him almost at once, to feel free and easy with him by being that way with them.

"Oh, all right, Mr. Strant," she answered.

They got the bloody-headed Litch

up the stairs and into Hondo's room halfway down the hall. The latter put a towel under Litch's head before they laid him out on the bed. As the gray coat fell back, the Kid saw the blood patch on the side of his fine ruffled white shirt over the right ribs. He had a body wound as well.

"We got to git a sawbones for this jasper, Hondo," Solo announced above the roar of the wind that shook the place and fluttered the curtains at the window. "Any other way outa here aside from the front stairs? Somebody might've seen us come in and the word might git out."

"Yep, Kid. An outside stairway at the back of the house. Just go down to the end of the hall. They's a door there... But there'll be danger in bringing a doc here."

"I know." Solo clapped on his hat. "But the big idee is to keep this gent from hitting the boothill trail... I'll be back." He went out and headed down the hall to the rear, found the back door of the second floor and was quickly moving down the outside stairway. He slipped along through the backyards, wraith-like in the eerie light, jamming his sombrero down hard on his forehead against the wind. Between a leg-pole butcher shop and a house he emerged upon the main line.

PONIES STOOD at hitchrails, tails between their legs, rumps turned to the wind; blinds were pulled tight and shutters had been put up before store windows. One that hadn't been protected in time, was shattered, glass lying out on the wooden sidewalk. As the Kid hesitated, leaning against the whipping wind, a figure came out of the dust haze on his right, a small boy. And luck was with Solo that time; the boy told him the pill roller's house was just a few doors down to his left.

When the doc opened the door, a brisk little man with a cast in one eye, Solo told him about the man down in the boarding house, where Hondo's room was. The sawbones said he'd get over as soon as he could; he had a patient inside who'd been hit by a falling tree limb in the windstorm. Leaving him, Solo cut across the road and down an alley to get behind the main street on that side. He hadn't forgotten his paint pony that he had left tethered in front of the eating place.

There was a straggling lane a little way back paralleling the road on that side. He travelled along that. The wind was easing off somewhat; he was right near a big aged eucalyptus tree when he spotted the blurred figures of a little band of men through the dust-laden atmosphere. The Kid glided behind the thick bole of the eucalyptus. The band came along with their guns out, one of them wearing a deputy's badge.

"Old Jeff said he thought he saw that Kid slipping off this way, out to the Potter place," one of them said as the wind fell off.

"Nobody saw him hit horseflesh that's for sure." That was Jem Reban talking. "He couldn't uh gotten far —not with that Litch with him."

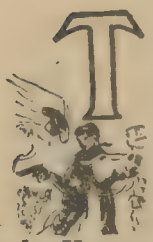
The wind fanned up again. Solo with a gun out, ached to make a play. He wanted Jem Reban so as to clear himself; Strant was a wanted man, wanted for what Jem Reban had done. But the Kid's hands were tied at the moment. It was maddening.

They didn't come by the big tree. Peering around it, Solo saw them turning into a patch up the hill away from the main line. The last man toted a double-barrelled ten guage shotgun. The Kid's mouth hardened; obviously they were combing the pueblo for him. About Hondo, they didn't know.

After a couple of minutes, he went on till he got down back of the restaurant. He cut through between it and the place next door, an undertaker's establishment. The paint horse was still there at the hitchrail all right. But the Kid crouched between the two buildings, trying to reconnoiter the road despite the poor visibility. The horse might have been identified as his, left there as bait. He was about to step out when he saw a figure working up the sidewalk to the left side of the restaurant. Before he reached it, he turned into a doorway a couple of buildings

down. And the cat-eyed Kid recognized the deaths-head face of Anson Carby.

4



THE MAN vanished from sight. The Kid darted out, saw that he had gone into a barbershop. The doorway opened onto a flight of stairs. Over the doorway was a fancy gilt sign that read: *Homesteaders Land Company*. The Kid's mind groped for a moment, then he had it: Bo Reban had told him that one of the men who'd made a bid for his place was gent named Turner, manager of the Land Company office. Solo wondered what Carby could be doing up there. He never hesitated; another moment he was inside the door and cat-footing it up dusty wooden stairs.

The door at the top was to the left side of the stairs. It had glass panes in the upper half with a shade inside pulled down behind them. But one of the panes had a corner knocked out. Through the hole came the sound of voices inside. One of them was a tight thin voice, biting now in anger.

"You gophers have messed up everything you've tried," the speaker lashed out. "Bunch of jugheads, I say, by Gawd! You had Reban in your hands—and lost him. Then you spotted this Strant person in town right here, got the marshal to grab him—and lost him, too!" There was the sound of the man spitting into a cuspidor. Outside, Solo noted that he spoke like an Easterner with none of the rangeland vernacular; only an occasional New England twang. The other went on, cursing some. "And now Litch is gone, disappeared!" There was the squeak of a swivel chair as the speaker got out of it and began to pace around. "I hired you stupid, brainless, blundering dogs to—"

"Take it easy, Turner!" Anson Carby barked at him. "We don't like to be called names like that out here an'—"

"And I don't like to pour my money down a rat hole!" Turner snapped back. "I'm paying you people to break Reban somehow so I can get hold of that place. And that means taking care of the half brother, Litch, so he won't come into it. And what? You've bungled and stumbled all over the place like a bunch of—"

"Now, wait, Turner!" Anson Carby started. "We—"

"You have a nice big fat chunk of my money; then I gave you more when you said you were going to kill Bo Reban, and get Mose Litch! You said you'd have to have more money if you were going to take the chance of out-and-out murder. With them both dead, the bank would foreclose and I could buy it out at the foreclosure sale. Yes. But you've taken neither of them! And you haven't forced Reban off either!" He swore some more.

Anson shot back, "Litch is wounded! He can't go far. Anyway, it's this danged Strant fella who's tangling up our play! The Silver Kid, I hear he's called. The snake's a danged ghost, too. He busted up the hanging. Then today he hit town, beat out the marshal, and slipped Litch away afore we—"

"I'm tired of excuses and alibis," Turner snorted. He could be heard striding around again. He had squeaky shoes.

OUTSIDE, the wind whacked down the street and the building trembled. A draft from somewhere plucked at one side of the little shade inside the upper half of the door, swung it a few inches sideward for a couple of seconds. It left a fractional segment of the glass uncovered, and the Kid had a brief glimpse of Turner, a small dapper man in black with a fancy flowered vest. A big diamond pin was stuck in his ascot tie below the stiff gates-ajar collar. He had a mouth like a seam in a plump face stabbed by shoe buttons of black eyes.

"Why do you want that danged ol' strip of no-good pasture land

anyway, Turner?" Anson Carby asked.

"That's my business," snapped Turner as the shade slipped back into place, cutting off the Kid's view. "You take care of yours—the job I've paid you to do! See? And—look!" Turner's shoes squeaked loudly as he apparently turned on a heel inside. "Gawd, I have to do the thinking for you, too!"

The Kid was vaguely aware of a

fresh draft of wind coming up the stairs. But, as Turner dropped his voice inside, Solo was so intent on catching what he said he didn't get the significance of it. "Your breed can only think with your trigger fingers, Carby... Look. Killing Litch might frighten Bo Reban out. But here's something much better. *Kidnap* him—then I have a club to hold over Reban, his half-brother's head. Get it?"

"By grab," Anson Carby said with awe in his voice, "that sure'd be a slick one. 'Course, we got to give Litch a catching first. And that Strant—"

"Forget Strant! The doctor!" Turner was a sharp one. "Go see him; find out if he's treated any wounded men, recently. Watch his house. Litch might try to slip in there to be treated. Now—"

It was then the Kid caught the creak of a stairs tread behind him. He whipped around, then threw himself flat on the little landing as lead whistled over his head. Just coming up from the bottom, trying to sneak up on him was Tuck Carby; behind him were two of his men. He'd gone back outside to get after seeing the Kid crouched up there...

SOLO snaked out a Colts and sent a couple of slugs riding down the stairs. Big Carby jumped back down; they weren't fools enough to try to rush him. When he put his head over the edge of the landing, they cut loose at him from the dimness of the ground floor hallway, their gun muzzles frothing yellowish powder flashes. Tuck knew his brother was up there in the office, that they had the Kid trapped.

He leaped up just as the office door was jerked open. It was the gaunt skeleton-faced Anson. Doubled, the Kid hit him in the middle with a ramming shoulder. It was just as the amazed Anson fired and missed Solo's head by inches. The second Carby brother was carried backward and pitched to the floor, rolling on his side. Solo leaped over his sprawled form. Over behind one end of a rolltop desk, little Turner was crouched, going for a derringer inside his black frock coat.

Solo Strant wasted no time in getting around there to reach him. Spotting the open ink bottle on the desk, the quick-witted Kid grabbed it up and tossed it so the black liquid sprayed all over the dapper land agent's face and shoulders. On a little dude like that, it was more effective than a gun barrel blow; screeching like a hoot owl, he let go the half-drawn gun and grabbed for a handkerchief. Past the other end of the desk and toward the rear of the place, the Kid dashed, looking for a way out.

Ahead was a door leading into a rear room that ran the width of the narrow building. The Kid booted it open, jumped through, and slammed it shut behind him. He found himself in a cul de sac, a trap. It was

a sort of storeroom, dimly illuminated by a slot of window no more than a foot deep high up in the back wall. Solo swore softly. "All they got to do now is camp out there in that front office and wait for me to drag my tail out," he muttered.

Then, as his catlike eyes became accustomed to the dimness, over beyond a discarded dust-blanketed desk, he saw the little ladder leading to the trap door in the roof. He worked swiftly. As the first slug thudded into the thick door, he shoved the heavy desk, another rolltop, over across it to block it. Just for luck he sent a couple of slugs through the door himself. One must have been a lucky hit because a howled curse came from the other side.

He went up the rickety ladder, pried open the trap door, and hoisted himself through. Before he closed it down, he yanked up the ladder and dropped it on the roof. On the left there was just a small cabin. Over to the right, though, was another two-story building about the same height as the Land Office one. But a distance of some eight feet separated them. The Kid figured the answer quickly; he got the ladder and propping one end against a foot he lowered it till the other end rested on the adjoining roof. Like a cat he ran across it, then pulled the ladder after him.

But he still wasn't finished with it. Toting it along, he went to the back end of that roof. As was so common in Western town buildings, a little shed extended from the back of that place. But it was a low affair, too big a drop down. Solo worked the ladder over the side, lowered it as he knelt, then got down flat, holding the top rung by one hand, stretched far over. There was a single shot from over in the Land Office, then no more. The Kid savvied they must have taken a chance and gone into that store room and discovered he'd flown the coop.

The bottom of the ladder just touched the shed top. With a little prayer, he released it, thrusting the top against the back of the building. It jounced once, then steadied. In a matter of seconds he was down on the low shedlike extension, then dropping to the ground. He stood there a moment, thinking with that wire-sharp brain, trying to formulate a plan.

The wind had dropped to almost nothing now, and dust was slowly thinning in the air. But the lowering skies cast a strange greenish light over the earth, giving everything an unreal dim appearance. Twenty feet away a friend would look like a stranger. All colors were distorted, dimmed. Solo moved across backyards again, passing behind the eating place, thinking fast. Litch had to be gotten away from the boarding house plumb pronto. Sooner or later—and probably 'danged soon—they'd learn where he was.

HE WAS about to turn down beside the restaurant to get his pony out front when he happened to glance at the loading platform of the place next door, the undertaker's establishment. A pine box, a coffin, was propped up next to the back door. That gave him his idea; though he knew they might be in hot pursuit of him in a matter of minutes, the iron-nerved Kid trotted off there, pushed in the back door.

He was in the rear room of the place. There were more coffins and rough boxes propped up around its walls like mummy cases, the sickening stench of embalming fluid. On a table a sheet covered a figure, its bare feet sticking out.

"Now, Rufus, I want you to take these—" a man was saying as Solo stepped into the store itself. The proprietor heard him and turned around. He was a tall stoop-shouldered man in shirt sleeves and a shiny black vest—a man in his fifties, hairless, with weak watery eyes peering over thick-lensed glasses rigged low on a long nose.

"Hey there, what're you a-doing sneaking in here? Don't you dare touch that body back there, now! What do you want, anyways? I—"

"Stop crowing, Pop," Solo said easily. "All I want is a coffin, something plain and cheap to take a friend home in."

The undertaker dry-washed his hands. "Oh, I see, I see. Sort of a rough box, eh? Well-l, I have some nice ones in stock. Very nice ones. How tall is your friend?"

One was selected. The undertaker evidently was prepared for Solo to haggle over the price. The Kid merely pulled out a sizable roll; where Solo Strant got his dinero was a mystery like many other things about the inscrutable half-pint of a gun wizard. He dropped bills on the counter as the undertaker's eyes bulged behind his glasses. Then Solo added some bills to the price of the coffin.

"I want you to go to the livery stable and get a wagon and a team. Rent 'em. Then deliver this box to the back door of Mrs. Murphy's boarding house as soon as you can. And I mean *pronto prontito*. I want to take my friend back home to Wellsville," he said, naming a town down to the southeast. "*Pronto prontito*, sabe?"

"Yes-siree, yes-siree," said the undertaker, scooping up the bills with clawlike hands. "Your friend—what did he die of, may I ask? I can fix up the body real nice and—"

"Heart failure," the Kid clipped out. Over the undertaker's shoulder he had seen Tuck Carby and two men pass up the street, heads swivelling, toting bared guns. The hunt was on again. He dropped another sawbuck on the counter as the boy assistant, Rufus, a lank buck-toothed younker, stood gaping. "Bet you could use a new black suit in your line, Pop..." No lamps had been lighted in the funeral parlor; it was ghostly dim in there—for which the Kid was glad. "So you don't know who ordered this box or anything. Mebbeso it was just sort of a big fat man—or a fella in a gray suit, if anybody should ask you, Pop. Eh?"

The undertaker's hand enveloped that bill as he grinned around store teeth. "Why—no, weren't it a man and woman who come in, Rufus? Strangers from outa town, wasn't they?"

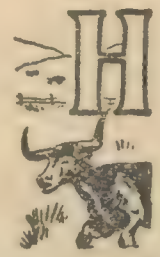
The boy, none too bright, frowned. "I don't see no woman."

"It'll be all right," the proprieter assured the Kid. "Rufus, he—well..." He tapped his forehead.

Solo went over to the boy and gave him a coin. "There's a paint pony at the hitchrail next door. Think you could bring him around to that alley there, near the back?" he asked.

The boy snatched the coin and scooted out the front door like a rabbit. A few moments later, the Kid hopped from the loading platform aboard the paint and was off at once. He cut for the lane. Just after he reached it, somebody shouted, but that was all. Even if he had been seen, he knew they wouldn't expect him to have a pony so handy. They'd only seen him afoot.

5



HE QUARTERED around the town, swung outside the shanty section squatting at the edge of the dried-up creek bed to the northwest, passed the end of the main drag, then cut around until he came in behind the boarding house. Leaving the paint in the horseshed there, he removed the saddle roll and went up the outside back stairs to the second floor.

"You're all right, Kid?" Hondo said, grabbing him by a shoulder. "One of the boarders came in a coupla minutes back, and I heard him telling Matilda they was some gunning down by the barbershop."

Solo nodded, poker face relaxing in a brief smile for once at Hondo's concern. It was good to have a brother siding you. For years the Kid had forked the out-trails alone. He still played many a hand solo now. But that had been a lonely life, at times bitterly so. "Oh, Tuck Carby and some of his hands tried

to use me for a little target practise. But—" He told him about Turner and what he had learned. The doc had already been there and left. "What did he have to say?" the Kid asked, studying the sleeping figure of Mose Litch on the bed. His head was ringed with a bandage. And a part of his fancy shirt had been ripped away on one side, revealing another wad of bandaging over the side wound.

"Head wound not serious—though he did get a bang against his skull that'll leave him weak and groggy for a spell," Hondo reported. "The side wound, that ain't so good. He had to dig for the slug."

Solo inclined his head toward the man on the bed. "Is he unconscious now?"

"Nope, just asleep; the sawbones gave him something to make him sleep."

"Did he recognize Litch?" Solo wanted to know.

Hondo frowned. "Couldn't be sure 'bout that. He said something about being new in this pueblo. But when he asked where the man got gunned and I said it was out on the trail, he did give sort of a—well, a funny look. I remember how his eyebrows climbed, Solo, and—"

"Wait a moment." The Kid left the room, eased quietly down the stairs. He heard Mrs. Murphy humming as she worked at the rear of the house somewhere. He turned the big key in the lock of the front door, then dropped the key in a little vase on the hall table. That, at least, would give them a little time if the Carby bunch tracked them down before they got clear.

BACK UPSTAIRS he told Hondo of the plans he had made, about the coffin. The slighter taller Hondo took his elder brother by the shoulders.

"No wonder they're so danged afeared of you on the out-trails, Solo," he said warmly. "It's more than your triggers. You can outsmart 'em, out-think 'em, and out slick 'em at every turn!"

Solo winked, though he got that sheepish look of embarrassment he always got when anybody complimented him or tried to thank him. He was already stripping off his silver-spangled garb. From his saddle roll, he produced some other clothes. A couple of minutes later he stood in a pair of gray pants tucked into his boots, a hickory shirt above it. The shirt had been bought deliberately a couple of

sizes too big so that it made him look even smaller and more narrow-shouldered as it sagged around his frame. From the chin strings he had removed the telltale silver skull and pocketed it. Then he turned the front of the sombrero brim downward so that it shadowed his face.

His appearance was changed completely; a gent would have to know him well and get a close looksee to recognize him.

"I'll be driving the wagon," he explained. He went down and opened the back door at the end of the hall at the top of the outside stairs so he could hear the undertaker arrive. Then they sat there smoking, waiting. That was one of the hardest things for the impatient Kid to do. The man on the bed moaned occasionally, once called for "Nell." Outside, the windstorm had passed on. The air was clearing fast. And a shaft of sunlight had poked through to play on the meeting house steeple they could see from the window. It was late in a fast-dying afternoon. Time seemed to hang on a hook.

"We'll take him out to Bo Reban's

place," Solo mentioned. "If they track us there, we'll have a chance of making a siege of it in the ranch-house." He related to Hondo Turner's scheme to kidnap Litch instead of killing him, thus to hold him as a threat over his half brother.

"They sure are a bunch of snakes," Hondo was saying. "I—"

The kid caught the welcome rattle of wagon wheels from the rear; when he got down there, they had a wagon with a team, the rough box coffin in the bed of the wagon. The undertaker had brought along another man, a big fat gent who kept picking at his teeth with a homemade toothpick.

"You want we should bring the box upstairs?" he wanted to know. "I can lay out the body real nice and purty so that when you git him home why—"

The Kid told him no and slipped him another bill, said they'd get the corpse down themselves. He couldn't get them away soon enough, knowing some of the Carby men would have reached that sawbones soon after he returned home. Back up in the room, Hondo picked up the slim Litch carefully. The man coughed in his drugged sleep; that was all. Solo strapped on his double shell belts with the two holsters bearing the silver stocked guns, pulled on his black coat to cover them.

Somebody hammered on the front door below. "Let's make tracks," the Kid said. "I figure that's them." Below, Mrs. Murphy wheezed as she moved from the rear of the house, calling "All right, all right," as the hammering was repeated.

Solo with Hondo and his burden moved along the upstairs hall. From outside the front door they heard a man threaten in a loud voice:

"Open up this danged door or we'll bust it down!"

"You break that door and I'll break your head, by the holy St. Peter, with this rolling pin I'm making a pie with!" Mrs. Murphy yelled back. "Give me time to find that key. Now where could I have—"

SOLO and his brother moved out to the head of the back stairs. They got down them safely, out to the wagon standing beside the horseshed. The sideboards hid all but the top of the coffin in the bed of it. Solo lifted the lid while Hondo got Litch stretched out in it. Then the Kid got a piece of wood to jack up one end of the lid so the sleeping man would get air to breathe.

"Lie down there next to the coffin, Hondo, and keep your hardware ready," he told his brother. "Now we make the run for it." He hopped over and onto the driver's seat, seized the reins. The only way out was the drive that ran up along one side of the old house. As he swung the team out past the front, he saw the front door standing open. The Carby men had gained entrance. They had gotten out just in time, maybe.

Up the lane he took the team and wagon, turned onto the main line, then drove along it eastward for the trail that would take them up the valley to Bo Reban's outfit. Folks were out on the street now in the ruddy glow of the sun. Shutters were coming down from store fronts, smashed signs being picked up. Men swung up to hitchracks on their ponies. Solo driving the wagon was just another jasper going about his business. But just in front of the undertaking establishment he had to rein up a few moments the while a woman in a buggy just ahead fought to calm the horse rearing and shying from a piece of paper blowing down the road.

"So long, Silver Kid! So long!" It was the boy, Rufus, standing in the doorway of the undertaking establishment. He had seen the wagon when they'd brought it down from the livery barn to lead the coffin onto it. And though Rufus might have been a little "tetched" in the head, in the store, he had evidently recognized Solo by the silver of his outfit, probably from stories he had heard about the famed Kid. "So long, Silver Kid!" he sang out loudly again.

Folks stopped on the sidewalks and turned. Two riders pulled up and peered at the driver of the wagon. Then a man came running out of a whisky mill. It was Jem Reban; he took one look and let out a yell to men inside.

"The fat's in the fire, Hondo! Git set for trouble," the Kid called back to his brother as he got the team started again. A little further on he lashed them into a dead run. He had also spotted Anson Carby with his bullet-branded hand still bandaged, stepping out of the doorway of the Land Company office a moment after Rufus had done his bellowing...

THEY TURNED onto the open trail down into the Ajo Valley, bending northward, the wagon careening, wheels jouncing off half-buried stones in the trail. Behind the coffin rocked around. "We were spotted, Solo?" Hondo called.

"Danged right! Git your smoke-poles ready!" He held the team to a hard steady run, lashing the lazy off horse once, a big gray, when it tried to slow. They rounded another curve in the road on two wheels between wooded low knolls. Solo hoped to make the open trail where they might make a running battle of it. Up a short sharp rise. And at the crest, they almost ran smack into Bo Reban coming the other way in his ranch wagon.

The Kid sawed on the reins, dragged the team to a halt. At once he saw the stark grief stamped on Reban's stern-mouthed flat-jawed face. Then he spotted the tarpaulin-wrapped thing in the back of the ranch wagon.

"My wife," Bo Reban said simply, voice harsh with h o a r s e n e s s. "Passed away—early this morning... Bringing her to town. I—I want a right decent burial—for her."

"I'm sorry, Reban," Solo said. But the practical-minded Kid was doing some swift figuring. Rapidly he told Reban about his half brother, how they had the wounded unconscious Litch in the coffin there.

"They wounded Litch, the dirty snakes? Is he hurt bad? Let me see—" He'd started to clamber down.

"Wait, Bo! Keep your head," the Kid commanded. "The Carbys'll be coming after us in this wagon. If you want to save your brother, here's what you got to do..." It was a grim plan, one that made Bo Reban shake his head vehemently at first, then turn a ghastly hue when he did agree, seeing it was the only way. "We'll take good care of her body, Bo," the Kid promised. "But it's possibly to save a life."

"I reckon she'd want it that way," Reban agreed.

The shift was made quickly by the three men, the coffin with the still drugged Litch asleep in it shifted into Reban's wagon. Then Bo himself tenderly lifted the tarpaulin-shrouded body and put it in the wagon the Kid drove.

"Go down to the *Creosote Bar* with it—at the back, Bo," the Kid told him. "Get Big Nell and tell her the story; she'll handle things then." He had seen once what a capable woman she was. He kept watching the back trail for rising floating dust from pony hoofs. He was baffled by the fact he saw none. The sad-faced red-eyed Bo climbed back onto his cart and picked up the reins. Solo whipped the livery barn team on again. There would be trouble for himself and Hondo anyway if the Carby band caught them. But at least Litch would be safe, could be slipped back into Big Nell's, the last place they'd ever think of looking for him. For even the Carbys wouldn't dare lay a finger on a man bringing his dead wife in for burial. Not that they had any code—but a whole countryside would rise up in fierce wrath if they did do such a thing.

He drove on another half mile, still puzzled by the fact there was no sign of pursuit. They were on the valley range now, following that trail up the west side. It came just as they dipped into a hollow, beside that sluggish yellow-watered creek. A fusillade of shots from the timber growth of the slope on the left. Some of the slugs came from

a little ahead and the Kid realized in a split second he could never race the team through. Even as he rose to leap from the box, drawing, and get on the off side to shoot from the cover of the wagon itself, he saw the bony corpselike face of Anson Carby as he bolted a stallion out from some saplings.

THERE WAS a cry from Hondo, erect in the wagon bed, just as he got off a couple of return shots. He spun around and fell, hit in the shoulder. Then the Kid himself got it. A slug drilled through the crown of his sombrero. It gashed his scalp.

He could feel the wave of blackness engulfing him in the air before he reached the ground. He hit it on his feet, then pitched forward onto the grass on his face, a foot from the slow running creek. He couldn't see. But it felt as if the whole range was slowly tilting upward so that he was sliding backward into some bottomless pit. It closed over him...

A man leaped up onto the wagon as the stunned Hondo clawed for his gun and tried to stagger up. The Carby man beat him over the head with his still smoking Colts barrel. "Hit him another clip, Sam!" a rider yelled. Two of them dragged Hondo from the wagon and held him up as he staggered, half conscious.

"We got the Silver Kid! We got the Silver Kid!" Ansen Carby bawled, leaping from the saddle. He walked up to Hondo and smashed him a blow in the mouth that brought blood.

"By grab, it looks as if Litch is a dead un," said the one up in the wagon bed, pulling at the tarpaulin enwrapping the corpse. "He—" Straightening, he gasped. "This ain't Litch! This is a woman—dead."

"You're locoed!" Anson Carby himself jumped up for a look. He saw. He stood knuckling his skeleton-like jaw. He thought he had pulled a right smart one, taking that short-cut path that knifed across the broken country instead of following the winding trail that led to the range. "Something's haywire here... Well, we got the Kid, anyway. We'll take him back to jail. It'll be something—putting Strant in jail, by grab! Git him into a saddle an' two of you fellas ride double!"

"Yeah," said one of them. "Let's git outa here. I don't like this... What about the driver?" He pointed at the real Kid lying motionless, face down. Nobody recognized him in that rig.

"Shucks, hell with him," Anson said, spitting tobacco juice into the creek. "Looks like he's cashed his ticket to Boothill anyways."

A few minutes later they were heading back up the trail to Ajo, the groggy battered Hondo in the saddle with two of them flanking him, one of them holding him by an arm to steady him...

Sometime later, with twilight settling, Solo Strant found himself sitting up, mechanically cupping water from the creek and splashing it over his head and into his face. Slowly at first, then with a rush, what had happened came back to him. He fingered the gash in his scalp. It had stopped bleeding. He realized, luckily, he had merely been creased, the slug just clipping him enough to knock him out but not seriously injured.

When he rose, at first he had to lean against one of the wagon wheels. Then his senses cleared still more and his legs steadied. By inspecting the tracks in the trail, he knew the band had headed back for town. The Kid fingered the silver skull he carried in a pants pocket. And this wasn't any psychic hunch this time. He *knew* there was going to be gunpowder burnt and blood spilled before this night was over. Because he

was going to have a hand in it. They had taken his brother, Hondo...

6

IT WAS A little less than an hour later when he stopped at a little place down from the edge of the town and got permission to leave the wagon in their shed. He explained there was a corpse in it. Unhitching one of the animals, he swung up bareback, quit the trail and veered south of Ajo. A little later, with his keen instinct for direction, he rode out of the brush of some sand dunes into the end of the straggling lane where the boarding house stood. Lights glowed cheerfully from the front windows now. But he pushed down through the high grass of the open lot on the near side and around to the horse-shed where he'd left his paint.

Mounting, in the rig of hickory shirt and gray pants and black coat, he rode openly down the main street to the *Creosote*. As he entered he was praying he'd run smack into a Carby. A cold rage gripped the Kid. And it was sharpened by the frigid finger of fear as he wondered what they had done with his brother. Then he heard a man at the bar say: "Don't seem possible they really got the Silver Kid himself down there in the jailhouse, does it?"

That told him. Wearing the same rig, the Carby bunch had taken Hondo for the Kid himself.

"He won't talk, he won't tell nothing, though," another gent put in. "Sure is a tough un. Heard tell he takes the Law into his own hands too danged much, anyways. This time, he wounded a John Law an'—"

Solo walked on by down to where Big Nell, in a low-cut pink evening gown, stood talking to a rancher and a slick-haired drummer. "Got some business with you," the Kid muttered in passing. He moved on down into the dimness of the hallway that ran to the rear.

Puzzled, not recognizing him in that outfit, the brassy-haired proprieteress of the *Creosote Saloon* followed him. He had to tell her who he was. When he pulled of his sombrero, she recognized him but was baffled.

"But you—why you're down in jail," she said bewilderedly.

"My brother... I'll explain that later. Did Bo Reban git here with Litch?"

She nodded, smiling, happy that Litch was back, hidden there, and alive. She led him to a back stairs at the end of the hall. The ramshackle building had half a second story in the rear like a coop set atop the structure. Big Nell's room oozed femininity, all taffeta and ruffles with fancy lace-trimmed curtains and reeking with cheap perfume. Mose Litch, Reban's half brother, snored on the canopied four-poster bed. Bo Reban himself, haggard and sunken eyed sat smoking on a dainty pink-covered chair by a window, a pile of stubs in the saucer beside him.

WHEN HE recognized the Kid in the unfamiliar garb, he passed a hand over his eyes in disbelief. Again Solo explained it was his brother down in the jailhouse. He explained where he had left Reban's wife's body.

The hungry-loop cowman nodded wearily. "Was a-figuring to jump that jail after the town closed up to try to git you out, Kid," he said.

"I'll snake him out somehow," Solo said, pacing nervously with that quick catlike tread. "Then they's going to be a gunsmoke showdown with those Carby polecats." His brain was working like mad. He asked some questions, found there was just Gunson the town marshal, one deputy, and an old rheumatic jailor at the jail.

"Gosh, if this town knew it wasn't you in that cell down there!" Reban said, lighting up another quirly. When the Kid asked about the figure on the bed, Mose Litch, Bo Reban's

face lightened a little; Litch was coming along fine. Right after they'd gotten him in here, he'd regained full consciousness, eaten some grub, then fallen off into a deep natural sleep. "That too is another score I owe you, Strant. I reckon you saved his hide. You an' your brother, leastwise, from what Nell tells me. Gee whilikins, if that marshal knew it weren't you he had! If he thought you were still on the loose, he'd—"

That gave the Kid his cue. He formulated the plan swiftly, asking Nell to send a man out to get the saddle roll from his horse. When it was brought up, he asked her to step outside. Then he took his regular silver-trimmed black clothes from the roll and swiftly changed into them.

"Are you locoed, Kid?" Reban wanted to know. "Why in that rig, you'll be spotted an'—"

"I want Gunson, the marshal, to spot me," the Kid came back calmly as he strapped on the twin silver-stocked guns, then restrung the miniature silver skull beneath his throat. "Bo, if I can draw Gunson and his deputy outa that jailhouse, would you take the gamble of jumping the jailor, gitting his keys, and getting Hondo outa there?"

Bo Reban's hard mouth worked a moment. "After what you've done for me, Kid, you have to ask me that?"

The ghost of a smile flickered on Solo Strant's face. "All right. Let's git moving then, amigo. I'll tell you the idee as we go along."

TEN MINUTES, later, the two of them crouched behind the one-story adobe structure. The dobie cuartel was down a little from Turner's Homesteaders Land Company office and on the opposite side of the street. As Solo edged forward he noticed there were lights on in that office shining over the half height curtain, running up from the bottom, of the office.

He waited till two men, arguing about the price of hay and feed, passed on up the road, Then he glided around the corner of the building to the little stoop of the jail. It was a warm humid night and the door stood halfway open. He was up the steps and looking in without being noticed. The horse-faced deputy dozed in a chair tilted back against the wall. Gunson himself sat at his desk paging through a mail-order house book.

"Gunson—pray!" the Kid said in that deceptively soft voice. He stood there, revealed in the lamplight of the office in his silver trappings, a full second after Gunson looked up, eyes bulging as if he saw a ghost. Then the Kid triggered. He sent a bullet whining past the lawman's head to chunk into the wall behind him. The miss was intentional. Whirling, the Kid leaped off the steps and headed up the road.

"Holy Gawd, the devil snaked outa that cell somehow! The danged ghost! I'll—" A bullet droned over the fleeing Kid's head. But the next one just passed his shoulder.

As he zigzagged across the road, he heard the running footsteps on the wooden sidewalk in his rear. A quick back glance showed him Gunson and his deputy in full pursuit. He had drawn them from the jailhouse. Another shot with the whole street in an uproar now.

"It's the Kid!" somebody bellowed as he passed the coaloil torch at the doorway of a little barroom. Ahead of him, three men halted, two of them going for hip holsters. Solo turned in by the corner of the honky tonk. But he was swaying as he ran now, head throbbing. He was still weaker than he'd thought from that creasing he had received out on the trail. Once he stumbled to one knee. Behind he could hear them closing in.

"Be careful," somebody called. "He may be waiting in the alley. He's slicker 'n slobbers!"

Reeling on, Solo got behind the building. But things hadn't quite worked out as he expected. He was playing a desperate game—and a

double-barrelled one. He was backing Bo Reban, all right; but he wanted to get the deadwood on Jem Rebam, Bo's cousin. The Kid wasn't afraid of dying in a gun fight; but he had a bigger stake; he wanted to clear his own name back in Broken Gun Flats.

He turned to his right, doubling back, once more passing behind the restaurant. Then he remembered the ladder he had left standing atop the shedlike extension of the building beside Turner's office earlier that day. A few yards on he looked up. And in the filmy light of the moon edging over the hills he could see it was still there. Somehow he got atop the shed, worked his way up the shaky ladder, clawed at the lip of the roof edge, and dragged himself over.

For a few seconds, he knelt there, heaving and dizzy. Then he managed to reach back over and hoist up the ladder after him. It fell beside him with a clatter as he himself collapsed flat on the roof top. For several minutes he lay there, the sweat drenching his face, his head spinning wildly.

"He couldn't git far ner run very fast—not with that shoulder wound," he heard Gunson say below. "Some of you men git over to the lane!"

AFTER A spell, they moved further off. The Kid sat up, but it was some little time before he was able to stand. Gradually his strength returned. And he remembered the lights he'd noted in the Land Company office. Steady on his legs now, his lungs no longer heaving, he retraced the steps he'd taken earlier that day, using the ladder as a bridge to get over to the structure housing Turner's office. The trapdoor in the roof came up easily. He put the ladder through and lowered it gently. Another few moments and he was standing in the storeroom behind the office proper.

He listened at the door. It was still out there though light did seep through a small crack in the door. The Kid started to ease it open, a fraction of an inch at a time. Finally he got enough of an aperture so that he could see Turner himself seated at his rolltop desk. A pen scratched away. On the right side of his face were two blotches he'd been unable to scrub off, remnants of the ink bath the Kid had given him earlier. Solo eased out a hogleg, about to step out, when he heard boots clumping up the stairs. He started to pull the door shut when there was a telltale squeak. He had to let it stay that way, several inches ajar.

Tuck Carby swaggered into the office, followed by the walking deathhead, Anson, and four of their gun toughs. With them was Jem Reban. Tuck puffed, "That dang Strant! He's slippery as a snake."

"That what the gunning was about?" Turner asked.

"Uh-huh. He got out, even took a shot at Gunson himself from the front door, then went up like smoke. They cain't find hide nor hair of him, dammit!" Jem Reban put in.

"And you can't blame us this time, Turner," Anson put in, picking his sombrero off the upright of a chair back. The little move told the watching Kid they must have been parleying up here at the time of the shots and run out to see what the trouble was.

Turner shrugged. "Strant isn't the man I'm interested in. As I was about to tell you when you rushed out like so many—so many fools—I know where Mose Litch is."

"What?" Tuck Carby cried.

"Yes." Turner tongued his overred mouth. "Money talks, my friends, and the bartender at the *Creosote* loves the language it speaks. After all, Mose Litch and Big Nell were right close. Engaged, they tell me. So—"

"Where *is* he? Forget the palaver, Turner. Where?" Anson said eagerly.

"Somehow—they got him back to *The Creosote*. He's lying with his wounds patched up in Big Nell's own bedroom," Turner said precisely.

Tuck and Anson Carby exchanged

glances, exchanged nods. "We'll grab him off this time all right," Tuck crowed, clapping his hat back on. "Let's see... We'll wait an hour or so till things git going high down there. Then we'll hit. All right, gents." He led the way to the door. "We'll have news—good news for you—afore the night's over, Turner!"

THE KID waited till the boots faded on the stairs. He let another couple of minutes pass. Then as he was about to step out again he caught the sound of cautious steps outside the office door. And then Jem Reban stepped back in.

"You said you wanted to see me private," he said to Turner.

"Yes, Reban. I figured we might make a little deal."

"Meaning?"

"Your cousin's wife is dead, I learned."

"That so?"

"I got sources of information," Turner went on smugly. "Now with her dead—and if Litch was taken care of, you'd be the only heir left according to the law."

"That's right," Jem said, rubbing his thick nose between those snaky eyes.

"All right. I'm not trusting those Carbys too much," Turner said slyly; "they might try to hold me up for a higher price after they took care of Litch. But if you got to him first—"

"I don't sabe," said Jem Reban after a moment.

The peeking Kid could see Turner sneer slightly. Turner said, "It's simple. Get Litch out of the picture, then we take care of Bo Reban, maybe on a legal conviction of rustling. In one way or another, anyway. And the cow spread is yours."

"Yes?"

"Then you and I can do business."

"But I don't want to work any cow spread, Turner."

"Who said anything about that? I'll buy it from you. All you got to do is take care of that Litch, then be prepared to swear later you saw your cousin, Bo, and Litch having an argument and that Bo shot him. That cuts the Carby brothers out of the picture. And after Bo is convicted, you and I can do a piece of business."

Solo saw Jem's eyes slowly widen as he got the idea. Avarice was an integral part of the man's makeup. Just as it obviously was of Turner's. He was trying to save himself dinero in his dealing with the Carbys; and because he was a double-crosser himself, he didn't trust them either.

"If you got to *The Creosote* before them, Jem..."

Jem Reban began to nod. "Uh-huh. Litch is wounded, too. All right, Turner. I'll get to *The Creosote* before them..."

The Kid heard him go down the stairs, just a greedy fool the shrewd Turner was using. Solo smelled the layout; Turner probably meant to double-cross Jem Reban to get him out of the way. Solo stepped out of that rear storeroom, dangling a gun by the trigger guard.

"Hello, Turner," he greeted the startled man...

WITH HIS customary silver-spangled rig on, the Kid entered *The Creosote* by the back door that time after slipping out of Turner's office. The latter he had left back there bound and gagged and rolled back into his storeroom. When the final hand had been played, it would be easy enough for the Law to pick him up. Turner had been an arrant coward; it had been fairly simple for the Kid to learn what he wanted to know. Turner had offered him as high as a thousand dollars to get out. Solo had laughed in his face. A couple of light whacks with the gun barrel, and Solo knew why Turner wanted Bo Reban's land so badly.

Over in Wellsville some time back, the sly Turner had run into a geologist who'd just come out of the Ajo country. On a hunch, the land company agent had gotten him orey-eyed, setting up a stack of drinks. And the geologists had confided

that out of curiosity—after all, the Ajo Valley had had an oil boom before its pools went dry—he had made some tests up in the sandy country near the Devils Hump, on Reban's land. He was convinced there was still a sizable pool beneath the ground there that had never been tapped.

Drilling would be a gamble; he wasn't dead certain. So Turner had come home, resolved to get Reban's place. But because he was miserly, because he hated to pay a fair price for anything and the oil angle was a gamble anyway, he had refused to bid too high. That had started the whole trouble, that and Bo Reban's resolve to hold onto the first land he'd owned, regardless of dinero.

Before he'd left the office, the grim-eyed Kid had convinced Turner that, when the show was over, the one way he could save his own neck would be to talk. So Solo knew when they got the Carby band, there'd be no trouble convicting them.

Now he hustled up the stairs, into Big Nell's room. Hondo was there with a proud-looking Bo Reban. The latter had snaked him out of the jail all right. The two brothers gripped hands, Hondo with his left. That slug out on the trail had gone through the flesh of his right shoulder; the doc had been down to the jail to fix it up all right.

As Big Nell came in, the Kid began to talk rapidly, giving them the story of what he had overheard in Turner's office. "They know Litch is here. And they'll be coming for him."

"We better watch the doors then and—" Reban began.

"No," the Kid vetoed that. "Litch is our bait—bait for our trap..." Then he went into the details of the plan he had cooked up...

He was on Bo Reban's side all right; he wanted to help him get out of this tight. But he also had his own problem; and that was to get Jem Reban, the blacksheep of the clan, dead to rights, to get him in a position where he'd have to admit to the knifework back in Broken Gun Flats. And he had figured out a way to do it...

7

IT WAS ABOUT a half hour later when the Kid caught the furtive creak of bootsteps on those back stairs. He slipped out into the hall and waited in the dimness. Jem Reban stepped up into the hall, a gun drawn, cold-blooded murder in his heart, moved to the doorway of the corner room. Just as he put his hand on the knob, the Kid slid up behind him and jammed his own Colts into the sidewinder's backbone. "All right, Jem; we'll just step inside and have a little parley."

The man rocked with shock, his eyes bulging as he twisted to look over his shoulder. The Kid kicked open the door. Jem was even more surprised when he saw his cousin, Bo Reban, and Hondo, almost the Kid's double, inside. Solo shoved him roughly into a chair after grabbing his hogleg. Jem sat plucking at his trembling lower lip.

"So you came to murder, you dirty little sneak!" Bo Reban roared, striding toward him.

But the Kid got between them. "Let me handle this, Bo... Jem, we're going to turn you over to Tuck Carby when he comes, a-telling him how you planned to double cross him!"

The man went ashen. "You can't do that!" he croaked. "He—he'd kill me. He—"

"That's exactly the idea," the Kid said coldly. "They's one way you can save yourself."

"How?"

"You knifed that old coot back in Broken Gun Flats—then blamed it on me, Jem." The latter started to shake his head. Solo cracked him lightly alongside the jaw with his gun barrel. "There's no sense in lying now, polecat, unless you want to be turned over to Carby."

Jem rubbed his heavy jaw. "Well, I—I was desperate."

"So am I," Solo shot back. "The

Law back there wants me—for what you did. Now, tomorrow I can drag you back there, and you can own up to the thing and clear me—or I can hand you to Carby when he comes tonight. You got your choice between a jail term—or being at Mr. Carby's tender mercies! Make up your mind, Jem!"

Jem Reban thought a few moments, then he nodded slowly. He was between the proverbial devil and the deep. "All right! Save me from Carby and I'll own up to the knifing job when we go back to Broken Gun," he said weakly.

The Kid looked at Hondo and Bo Reban. They were witnesses to the fact that Jem Reban had confessed.

Then Jem thought of something. "How're you going to save me from Carby when he gits here?" he demanded. "He'll have his bunch. And—"

"I know what the setup is," the Kid told him.

"Well, then, I gotta git out. I—"

"Like hell! You'd never stop travelling." He nodded toward a clothes closet over in a corner of the room. "You can duck in there when they come, packrat!"

"You mean you're going to wait for them and meet them?" Jem said in surprise.

"That's what we're here for," Hondo said...

THEY DIDN'T have long to wait. In a little while a houseman came up the back stairs. "Big Nell said to tell you Tuck Carby and his pack have just come in downstairs," was his message.

Jem Reban couldn't get into the closet fast enough.

Downstairs big Tuck strode to the bar with his gun toughs and ordered a bottle of red eye set out. The skinny Anson wasn't with them. Tuck had planned the job carefully. Feigning drunkenness, he pounded the bar and roared away as he sloshed down a few drinks. Then the gunfire started down the road near the town's edge on that side. Everybody swarmed to the front door to see what was happening; actually it was just one of Carby's cowhands down there in the dark triggering at the sky to create a diversion.

Tuck and his men though did not join the stampede to the door; instead they hit for that hallway and the back stairs. Anson came in the back door. "This is easier than spitting in a crick," big Tuck snorted.

Upstairs it was he who led the way into the big corner room that was Nell's own. Over near the window, beyond the foot of the bed lay the coffin, flat, with the lid on.

"By Gawd, mebbe he died," Anson croaked, "if they got him in the box. If he's dead..." He stood in the doorway, lowering his weapons.

"We'll see." Tuck bent, took one corner of the coffin lid, and in his rough manner, simply threw it off. Then he almost jumped out of his boots.

Mose Litch wasn't in that coffin; it was the Silver Kid himself, the famous silver skull glittering at his throat, who jack-knifed to a sitting position in the coffin, guns swinging up, hammers eared back.

"Hoist 'em, you gents!" the Kid, more sleepy-eyed-looking than ever, purred. He didn't want to shoot if it could be avoided. "Grab for the ceiling or you'll be putting your ponies in the Devil's Corral, pronto!"

Anson Carby let go from the doorway, shielded by the body of one of the gun toughs. The Kid's guns flamed, then; he got Tuck himself in his shooting arm, the impact of the slug slamming him backward toward the door. The jasper on the boss' left and a little behind, triggering wildly and instinctively himself, buckled over, having caught lead in the middle. A return bullet drilled a hole in the Kid's black shirt sleeve.

Solo swung himself erect in the seething thunderous turmoil. But in his hurry to get out of the coffin, one of his spur rowels caught on the edge and he stumbled against the end of the bed, unable to level and fire for a moment.

"Git the lowdown dirty—" Anson started, yelling to the others in the hallway. He never finished the remark.

For a hunk of Hell upended out in that hallway as the rest of the trap was sprung. Doors opened along the little upper section of the place. Hondo, dressed the same as the Kid, and Bo Reban sprang out of one. Down at the end, Mose Litch, wakened now though still weak, appeared, trying to steady a .38. The first shots were high, over the sidewinders' heads as the Kid had ordered. He wanted no more blood spilled than was necessary.

ONE OF THE trapped gun passers went locoed and tried to fight, slamming the trigger. Hondo and Bo Reban never did know which of them got him; the man simply folded up in his tracks with three chunks of lead embedded in his flesh. Four-five of the others couldn't shove up their hands fast enough, dropping their hardware. But two, nearest the stairs, made a break for it. And Anson Carby was hard on their heels, the lips of his skeleton-like head peeled all the way back to the roots of his teeth.

The hawk-eyed Kid saw him leave. As Solo lunged forward though, Tuck, down on one knee and half hidden by the side of the bed, stiffly tried to level a gun with the arm the Kid had nailed originally out there in the woods at the attempted hanging. He did get off a shaky shot. But the Kid, a fighting fury now, leaped over the fallen gunman and rode the trigger again. He took Tuck in the thigh. The big man rolled over on the rose-patterned carpet, screeching.

Out in the hall, Solo jumped for the stairs. He heard boots behind him; it was Hondo following to back his play. Down below, the Carby fugitives had headed for the front of the place. For the back door had been locked and the key removed. Big Nell had made certain the trap was as tight as possible.

Up front, in the barroom itself, men were bunched up around the turn at the front end of the counter, others plastered back against the far wall. Anson and the pair with him were headed for the front door. And then Jem Reban appeared, leaping off the boarded-in side stairway that led down from the front, fleeing for his skin. He had found a door in the back of the closet and was trying to make his getaway. Anson spotted him and guessed, figuring he must have warned the Kid about the situation.

"You dirty lowdown double crosser!" skeleton-like Anson, half crazed by the turn of events, yelled. "I'll—"

It was just then that Solo and his brother burst out of the hallway. The hawk-sharp Kid grasped the situation in a split second; he had to keep the hated snaky Jem Reban alive if he ever was to clear himself back in Broken Gun. Anson's gun spat at Jem. The latter went to a knee, his left leg gashed by a slug.

Then the Kid was between him and Anson Carby.

One of the Carby gun toughs spotted Solo coming and let out a yelp as he hit the trigger. Solo and Hondo, so alike in their rigs they seemed like twins, cut loose simultaneously. The man sank, pawing at his belt buckle, red liquid leaking over his hooked fingers. The leaping Solo threw himself in front of the kneeling wounded Jem Reban. Solo and Anson rode the triggers at the same instant. But the aim of the Kid in motion was inaccurate. He was high with his slug. Anson's bullet nicked the Kid's shirt sleeve; the room thrummed with the reverberations of the gun thunder.

The other Carby gunhand was already racing wildly for the door, cheek gashed by a slug from Hondo Strant's gun. Then it was just between Anson Carby and the Kid, crouching low as a shield before Jem Reban. Carby winged a slug close by the Kid's head. But the next moment, Anson was reeling back, the smoking Colts tumbling from his left hand. He had a slug in the upper arm. His face wrenched with pain, he half lifted the right arm. The bandage was gone from that hand and the raw red scar of the Kid's bullet brand showed plainly.

"I give up!" he said between teeth set against pain.

HONDO LOWERED his weapons. For a moment it looked as if the legend of the bullet brand for once had failed. The room grew quieter. Anson half turned toward a chair, groaning. And then, with that bullet branded hand, he went for a hideout weapon stached under his coat. He got it out, almost up. The Kid's slug just glanced off the hideout gun's barrel. It twisted the .38 in Anson's grip, twisted the muzzle around toward himself. And the gun went off: Anson Carby hit the floor with a flopping sound, chest split by his own slug, dead in a split second.

"What the hell's going on here, now! What—" Gunson the marshal came barging in, gun drawn, his deputy behind him. He broke off as he saw what looked like two Silver Kids standing there. "Holy Jehosophat, one of you jaspers belongs in jail! By grab, I'll—"

"Go up to the Land Office Company," Solo cut in lazily. "Mr. Turner's got a little story to sing to you—a story that'll jail the rest of this pack for life. Uh—I just remembered something." He went over to the bar and ordered a drink from the barkeep who'd finally risen from the floor. When it was poured, the Kid picked it up, smiled as Big Nell was approached, then slammed the whisky in the lank, buck-toothed double-crossing drink wrangler's face. He grabbed the sputtering man by the shirt front, hauled him halfway across the counter, and calmly hit him flush in the mouth. One of the buck teeth spattered out. The Kid released him to let him flop down behind the bar.

Gunson tried to get command of the situation, glowering. "I don't savvy this! Pen that hardware! One of you two," he nodded at Solo and then at Hondo, "is the one accused of that knifing over at Broken Gun Flats and—"

Solo pointed across the room at Jem Reban who'd dragged himself onto a chair. "There's the man who did that knifing job, marshal."

"He lies, he lies," Jem began. "They got me upstairs and beat me up and made me say that—"

Then Bo Reban walked out of the hallway into the barroom. "There's the liar, marshal—my cousin, Jem! Even though we're related, I'm ready to testify against him. I heard him admit he did it, by grab! I'll swear to it."

Gunson swabbed sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, still half confused. "All right, all right, I'll take him in. But—" He peered closely at the Kid and his brother. "Now, look, which of you is which—I mean—who is—"

The Kid winked at Hondo. "Let's not tell him..."

THE END

Nancy slapped Dan's face. "I came here as a friend to give you a warning, and I find you as contrary as a sore-nosed grizzly bear!"

THE HATE FENCE

by W. F. BRAGG

The big chinook was coming, and Dan McGee would be washed away, very likely drowned with his stock. Nancy wanted to warn him, but how could she talk to so stubborn a man?

A HUNDRED head of gaunt and bellowing cattle trailed Dan McGee's bobsled through belly-deep snow as he pitched off the last load of hay. His stockyards were almost empty. A dozen freshly-skinned hides of weaker animals hung over his corral down in the bend of Buckskin River below Dark Canyon. Word had drifted down from the Rockies, from up around the head of the Yellowstone and the Snake, that the snow still lay belt deep to a tall Indian, that ice sheathed the streams.

Dan leaned on his pitchfork and considered his starving cattle. He had wintered the bulk of his small herd but his hay wouldn't hold out much longer. Spring must come soon to end this long drawn-out misery of roaring blizzards alternated with spells of calm cold when the mercury hit forty below and cow critters suffocated when clinging icicles plugged up their muzzles.

Spotting a weak yearling leaning against the barbed wire fence that ran between his bottom land and the red wall of the open range to the eastward, Dan jumped off the sled. He plowed through the snow, bulky as a bear in his wolfskin coat and muskrat cap. He trudged on, back humped from the labor of pitching hay for weeks on end, rings of black soot around his deeply sunken eyes to ward off blinding rays of the sun on the dazzling snowfields.

For the sun was shining overhead, for the first time in two weeks, but without warmth. Toward the hazy north, white and sparkling mountain peaks sawtoothed the skyline. When

Dan breathed deeply, the sharp cold bit at his lungs and frost formed on the day's growth of whiskers that bristled on his bulldog jaw.

Reaching the yearling, he cut away the icy mass that hung from the animal's mouth and nose. Dan considered the scrawny animal before putting away his knife, wondering if cutting its throat to put it out of its misery wouldn't be a kindly act. But when it looked at him dumbly with wide frightened eyes then turned, and lurched off toward the herd scattered on the feed ground, Dan let it live.

He turned toward the west, inspecting this mile of low ground along the winding Buckskin River where his father had homesteaded in the old days. Silt, deposited here by flooded streams, made this the only bit of hay land in miles worth cultivating. Hay off it had saved Dan's cattle when other open-range ranchers, back in the higher arid hills, had been forced to sell off in the fall due to lack of grass.

Dan's only complaint, when he quit punching cattle and took over the spread after his father's untimely death, was that the land lay almost at water level along the river. If a sudden winter breakup started floods rolling down from the Rockies, he'd be forced to move fast to drive his cattle to high ground before they drowned.

IT WAS about noon and the feeling back of his belt buckle informed Dan it was about time to drive back to his cabin on the river for a meal. He raised a clumsily mittened hand to rub a sore spot on his gaunt right cheek where the frost had bitten in deeply. The spot always stung in cold weather. But he dropped his hand suddenly and opened wide his blurred gray eyes, staring hard into the blue sky west. He felt something warm against his cheek, a vagrant touch of air as soft as the breath of a baby.

It was the first outdoor warmth he had felt since the first of the year and here was March with the snow still piled as high as the second strand of his fence wire.

"Chinook," he whispered softly. "Chinook wind comin'!"

Somewhere, far out in the Pacific, this wind had been born. Crossing the Coast Ranges and the Sierras, it had dropped its load of rain, then drawn up the heated air of the vast interior deserts as it droned on toward the snowy Rockies. And here, deep in the snow, big Dan McGee smiled like a child as he felt its first warmth.

"Chinook!" he said again, talking aloud like many a lonely rancher does, who, blocked by winter, hasn't seen a neighbor in weeks.

From the direction of the fence behind came an answer to his exclamation, almost like an echo.

"A big chinook, Dan!"

He lurched around and saw her standing just outside the fence, a tall girl with a red knitted cap pushed down on her tawny hair, eyes of a startling blue against the background of her tanned face. She wore a sourdough coat and California wool jeans with the ends stuffed into squaw-stitched, knee-high elkskin moccasins. Her toes were thrust into leather stirrups on a pair of long home-made skis, and a double track down the steep ridge behind her indicated she had come down from the snowbound high country.

"Nancy," he said, and now he frowned, for the last time he had seen her, a hostile bullet had come his way. "Nancy," he plowed his slow way to the fence, "what you doin' down here? You know how your father threatened us if we met again?"

"A coyote trapper came in last night," she answered; "he brought word that a big chinook had hit the western hills. Snows' are melting fast; there's a big breakup due." She pointed toward the narrow mouth of Dark Canyon south of Dan's place. "If the ice has gorged anywhere in that canyon and the chinook loosens it up too fast, Dan, you'll lose all your cattle. Unless you get out fast! I knew you were too busy feeding to get around much for news. So—

I put on my skis and brought you this warning!"

Dan nodded and answered soberly. "Thanks, Nancy. But just the same you shouldn't have run the chance of bringin' on another shootin' scrape with your father. When he shot me up before, I said I wouldn't see you again unless you quit him and came to me, *willin'*. I didn't want to be forced to hurt him. But —you said he was too old to leave alone in the hills."

The girl took off her cap and fluffed out her dark curls to let the soft western wind blow through them. Eagerly she tilted her short rather stubborn nose and sniffed the breeze for it carried a promise of spring to this winter wearied land. Dan stood watching her with a glow in his deeply sunken eyes.

THEY WERE both stubborn, he thought, both of the mule-like western breed that refused to give in to hard winters; that freezes and suffers to save its cattle, sheep, and horses; that smiles briefly when the first chinook blows warmly then turns hurriedly to the work of saving something from the savage flash floods.

"I came down here to warn you because we're neighbors," the girl told Dan.

He laughed shortly. "*Neighbors?* With our fathers' fightin' each other for years over this land along the river. "He shook his head. "Strange how your dad could never see that mine was in the right and entitled to this place. He got to the land office first over the mountains and homesteaded it. Even though he was shot in the leg by your dad."

"You father was *never* right," she retorted fiercely. "He crooked my father out of this land, forced him to go into the dry hills where it was lots harder to winter cattle. He killed my father's horse, when they were racing neck and neck for the land office, and set him afoot fifty miles from town."

Dan shrugged. "But your dad reared up and shot off my father's right leg as he was gallopin' away. The doctor had to take it off. He died a year ago, and I swear it was the years of agony he suffered that shortened his life."

She thrust her young body against the taut fence and her color was high as she glared into Dan's mocking face.

"You stand there and blame my father for something that happened before we were born. That's when they ran this fool race for a bit of land; that's when they shot each other up." She leaned across the fence and slapped Dan across the face. "I came here as a friend to give you a warning, and I find you still as contrary as a sore-nosed grizzly bear. I had something else to tell you, something you'll *need to know* in plenty of time if the water starts rising in the river."

With the print of her hand red as a cow brand across his gaunt face, Dan leaned over the fence and seized the girl's coat collar. He pulled her so near him that their faces weren't six inches apart. She struggled like a wildcat in his grasp but he wouldn't release her.

"Don't think I'm goin' to kiss you," he snarled. "Our flirtin' days are all over. Go back to that old man of yours, that bullheaded old fool, and tell him I'd have slapped you up to a peak today if you had been a man."

"Oh," she flamed, "if I were a man I'd climb that fence and show you!"

In the rear a rifle banged. A bullet thudded into the fence post, ten feet from where Dan struggled with the girl. Looking over her writhing shoulder, he saw blue smoke curling up from behind a huge boulder, black against the snowy slope of the divide. With a snarl, he thrust aside the girl and tore almost all the loops off the front of his coat before he remembered that he wasn't wearing a gun today.

"Your dad trailed you," he said, between his teeth. "So much for your warning. Looks like you put me on the spot. If I had a gun with me, I'd teach him not to shoot up a man standing on his own land."

He had hurled Nancy aside so sav-

agely that the skis tripped her and she sank to her knees in the snow. She scrambled up with the tears racing down her brown cheeks. But he saw that they were the tears of rage.

"*Your* land?" she stormed. "You mean land that you McGees cheated my father out of!" She shook her head as she sobbed. "I'm sorry I ever came down here! I hope you get flooded out and lose every critter you own!" She turned and spat like a cat. "I hope you go down the river with 'em. And—and *never come back!*"

Up the slope, a lanky old man, with a muskrat cap jammed down on his rough thatch of grizzled hair, appeared from behind the boulder. A bristling gray spike beard accentuated his nutcracker jaws and his big hooked nose. He slanted a big old black powder rifle across his front.

"Nancy!" he bellowed, "get the hell up here! What do you mean by bustin' my orders and sneakin' down here to see that lyin' hog of a McGee? Come on up here before he chokes you to death!"

The girl swung around on her skis and began to do a slow zig-zag march up the slope. "I came down to warn him, Dad," she cried indignantly, "of the big chinook. And he slapped my face!"

"Slapped you, girl?" roared old Simms. "No McGee can lay hands on me or mine." He flipped up the rifle and the bullet almost overtook Dan as he cast himself behind a fence post.

"Dad!" Nancy screamed. "He's not armed!"

Old Simms blew the smoke from his rifle and shouted down to Dan. "*Get armed then!* I give fair warnin'. I'll kill you on sight next time we meet up."

AS HE WENT about his afternoon chores, Dan worked in his shirt sleeves, for the warm west wind had strengthened and the sun gleamed with a milky light behind a gray high haze. The snow no longer crunched beneath a man's boots and clumsy cattle were breaking through the tops of dirty gray drifts along the river.

An old roan cow chose this early date in the spring to put a calf on Dan's tally. Dan cursed the anxious mother for her ambition but made a warm bed for the wobbly-legged little fellow in the lee of his last hay stack. If a rise of the river came suddenly, the calf would likely die, for it could never keep pace with the herd on a hurried drive to the high country.

Before he fed the evening oats to the big buckskin pony he kept up and hard for saddle work, and put nosebags on his faithful old bobsled team, he went down and inspected the river.

Of course, he reflected, as he looked across the thick and unmoving ice, the girl's warning of a big chinook might have been but the gossip of some old badland trapper paying for his supper with a little sensational rangeland talk. Dan walked out on the ice and gave it a couple of thoughtful kicks. The stuff seemed so solid that he half believed it would never move.

But when he turned his back to the wind and stomped back to the cabin, he felt the drive against his body, and heard, above him, the high rushing sound like a gale droning through a forest.

While his lonely supper was cooking, he made up a small saddle pack for any emergency. Into it he put a few cans of beans, a box of crackers, a pair of wire cutters in case some of his cattle might be run against their will into an angle of his fence. But he had become so accustomed to the dull rut of winter that he told himself he'd probably never need the pack.

He thought, too, of Nancy Simms, wondering why she so stubbornly persisted in defending her hardheaded old father. He had gone to the little rangeland school with Nancy but it was quite understood, even then, that there must be no friendliness between a McGee boy and a Simms girl. Then Dan had gone off to ride range and hadn't returned until his father's last illness. It was

about then that he encountered Nancy at a dance in the valley. Strangely enough, they met quite often after that, along the red wall divide that loomed east of the river. Always they met by accident while keeping an eye on errant cattle.

Dan polished off the eye-pieces of a pair of excellent field-glasses, a gift from his father that he prized. He smiled grimly, recalling that these glasses had, once before, saved him from the gun of old Simms. His buckskin pony had drawn very closely to Nancy's roan and, somehow Dan's strong right arm had slipped around the girl's slim waist. He was bending toward her when she whispered faintly. "Take a look around the country for Dad! He told me this morning to stay away from you."

The glasses had picked up old Simms, approaching at a gallop. Dan had ridden boldly to meet him, disdained the old man's drawn gun, his roared out threats against a McGee who dared to make love to a Simms girl.

Dan frowned and rammed the glasses back into their leather case. He had called on Nancy to make her decision and she had chosen to stay with the father, her contrary, jug-headed father, because he was so old. When she might have come down to the river bend and queened it over the McGee cow spread.

HE BANKED the fire in the stove and pulled back his bunk blankets. Before he blew out the lamp, he stood listening to the wind that droned and blustered around the roof. Then, above the stormy tumult he heard the long drawn-out bellowing of cattle. Seizing his six-shooter, he rushed to the doorway. It might be a wolf after the newborn calf. When gray raiders threatened, range cattle bunched up like buffalo to protect their young.

No wolves or coyotes had attacked the herd; the dumb brutes were just uneasy. They were not bedded around the haystack. They had scattered around the field where he fed them, and stood with their backs to the wind, one answering the call of another. Dan tilted his head and the night sky seemed misted over, with the stars showing but dimly, and a curious high-pitched wailing of wind far above his head.

He went down to take another look at the river. The path he had made to his water hole was muddy. The snow had melted and run down the track and the frost was beginning, even with the sun gone, to come out of the ground. But the ice of the river seemed firm. He stamped with a boot to test it since he hadn't cared to fool with a lantern in the windy darkness.

Somewhat reassured, inclined to discount the girl's story of a big chinook, he returned to the cabin. But when he pulled off his boots, he discovered that they were soaked to the instep. He sat staring at them on the edge of the bunk.

Water was running over the top of the ice. Water and wind would cut away the anchor ice along the banks. Soon, pressure cracks would slant from shore to shore and huge cakes of ice, at last released, would bob and whirl in open water until they came to rest against some obstacle. There they would pile up slowly, forming a gorge and damming up the river. Imprisoned water, its channel closed, would spread over low banks and turn Dan's fields into a boggy lake.

But he didn't believe there'd be much high water for a day or two. He couldn't look for a hundred miles up the winding, canyon contorted course of the Buckskin and see big ice floes jamming up and every usually dry gulch that pitched into the river, running bank-full with muddy floodwater. He couldn't see the huge gorges piling up on the fang-like rocks in the narrow canyons, and hear the boom and hiss of angry flood water as it beat at these dams fashioned by nature.

He turned in but slept with clothing on, and uneasily. He seemed to awaken almost every hour and each time he could hear the worried bellowing of the cattle and the high whine of the chinook wind. He stepped to the doorway a couple of

times and peered out but all outdoors seemed serene. He listened closely for the grinding noise of ice breaking in the river but the Buckskin still slept its winter sleep beneath thick ice.

The last time he raised his head, a dim gray light outlined the single window in the rear wall of the cabin. The shack seemed to stagger and rock on its foundations against the fury of the wind that beat against it. He heard, too, the deep-toned bellowing of the cattle. And then—another sound that wiped all the sleep from his eyes. A crunching grinding sound, a persistent ominous sound. The ice on the Buckskin was breaking up. Highwater had swept down from some gorge that had failed in the canyon.

Dan jumped from his bunk without pausing to draw on his boots and found himself knee-deep in ice water. He lit his lantern, hanging from a hook at the head of his bunk and saw that the interior of his cabin had become a sort of swimming pool in which floated all his grub and possessions that hadn't been stacked on shelves. Water had forced open the door, and, even as he watched, the level reached the grate openings of his stove.

Back on the bunk, he pulled on his boots. He grabbed for his wolfhide coat, his emergency pack, six-gun belt and field glasses. He sloshed from his cabin down to the feed corral where he had stabled his horses. The water was up to his thighs by the time he had freed his two workhorses and cinched his saddle on the buckskin. The daylight increased swiftly, and now he saw huge blocks of ice being forced up on the banks of the roaring river, grinding and crunching against one another as the fury of flood water moved them down the stream.

As he turned the buckskin across the flooded fields toward his cattle, already bunched along his eastern boundary fence, he saw a piece of land, undercut by the high water break off and fall into the Buckskin. It carried along a huge old cottonwood tree that had stood here for a hundred years. The fall of that giant indicated the force that had been released by the canyon.

DAN WASTED no time driving his cattle a quarter mile down the fence to the gate. He had disregarded the girl's warning but luck had held for him. Yet, within the hour, this low bend on the river would be drowning deep with water and skull-crushing cakes of ice.

With water up to his gunbelt, he cut the fence wire and let the lead of his herd through the ten foot opening. Mounted, he tallied them as they passed. He knew every critter in the bunch for he had looked down on them for hours each wintry day as he pitched hay. He grinned mirthlessly for they were all here; none had bogged down in the rotten snow and mud of the swiftly flooding field. Then his smile faded. The old roan mother cow wasn't here. He turned and stared toward his last haystack, saw her standing forlornly by it with the water level up to her brisket. And, while he watched, she began to bellow as though calling to him for help.

The calf, he decided, must by this time be well under water and drowned. If he rode back, even his tough horse might be bogged down and caught by a sudden rise of the river. In the full daylight now he could see the fury of destruction going on, and noted that the roof of his cabin was all of his home that appeared above the boiling yellowish surface of the stream.

But Dan was a cattleman, bred to the old tradition of thinking first of his livestock, then of himself. He put the spurs to Buck and the game cowpony fought and slogged and somehow carried Dan back to the haystack. Some floating fence posts had lodged against a side of the stack and he saw the calf sprawled out on his barricade. Now and then, it feebly answered its mother's bellowing for it had discovered that the water barred it from a warm breakfast.

A man would be a fool, Dan told himself, staring at the calf, to put

its extra weight on his horse. He flourished his quirt and Buck breasted the water as Dan sought to drive the roan toward the break in the fence. The cow evaded the threats of the pony, dodging around clumsily, pointing back each time toward her bawling calf. It became clear to Dan that the mother would never desert her young.

So the tall rider, pushing Buck as near the posts as was possible, leaned from his saddle, grabbed the calf by the slack skin of its back and neck, and lifted it, bawling loudly, to his saddle fork. Angered, the roan cow came at Buck with lowered horns but the deepening water hampered her charge and Dan splashed spray into her eyes with the lash of his quirt.

Turning the buckskin, Dan headed for the cut in the fence. It was near the spot where, yesterday, the girl had warned him of the big chinook and her angry father had looked at him through a rifle's open sights. His string of cattle were filing up the steep winding trail that led toward a break in the sheer red cliffs where Big Dry Creek had cut a course from the badlands.

THE BUCKSKIN was in swimming water before Dan cleared the fence and started up the divide trail. At the heels of the horse followed the old roan mother, anxiously answering the bleats of her offspring. And Dan cursed the roan when he came out on muddy ground at the foot of the slope for her bellowing had halted the cattle all along the trail.

The bawling of a newborn calf, Dan knew, would sometimes turn and stampede a herd of range cattle: he must get the mother and the calf to the lead of the noisy parade up the steep trail. He fogged Buck onward, clearing a way with the lash of his quirt. The cattle flinched away from him, up to their hocks now in rotten and rapidly melting snow. The big drifts were breaking up all along the northern rims and he heard the roar of water churning down every dry coulee and gulch toward the river.

The trail rounded a sharp corner and he came out on a high point that overlooked a small shelf of dry ground, just above the course of Big Dry Creek.

Here he reached the lead of his herd and understood that it wasn't the bawling of the calf that had caused the halt. These gaunt longhorns were eager to reach high dry ground where the big chinook wind, burning away the snow, had uncovered the first tufts of cured buffalo grass. They were as weary of winter as Dan, and just as hungry for a change in the daily ration. The leaders stood with their heads thrust eagerly over the top wire of a fence that had been built so recently across the trail that the wire still glittered in the blazing sunshine.

This hate fence then was what the girl had intended to tell him about if they hadn't started an argument over their feuding fathers. Once a dry-lander had held this land where the trail broke through to the high lands. He had starved out and moved on, rolling up his wire and taking it with him but leaving his line of cedar posts behind, marching from this crest straight down to the bank of Dry Creek.

Dan turned in his saddle and looked down the slope. He wasn't surprised to see a canvas-covered sheepwagon standing on the shelf. And outside its opened door, the lanky form of old Simms. Simms and his ever-present rifle. It was quite clear to Dan that old Simms had chuckled maliciously as he sat around his ranch, all winter, planning this closing of the only trail within miles. He had secured some sort of title to the dry lander's claim, strung wire along the posts, and pulled the sheepwagon down Big Dry to serve as a temporary shelter while he made his stand against Dan McGee and his cattle.

If the labor of feeding cattle hadn't pinned Dan to his ranch, he'd have ridden the hills more and discovered Simms' intentions. But now the safe trail was closed, there was no turning back for the yellow waters and the grimy ice floes of the

Buckskin had flooded the McGee bend.

OLD SIMMS looked up the line of wire. He was at least two hundred long horse jumps down the slope. But his rifle would carry up easily at such range. "Get your critters away from my fence, McGee!" the old feudist shouted, "Or I open fire!"

"I'm flooded out!" Dan called back. "I've *got* to go through to high ground!"

"Turn back, damn you! It's the last warnin'! Remember what I told you yesterday—to arm yourself for I intended to kill you on sight!"

A man could slip from the saddle, get behind a rock, start a gun duel. But what of the cattle? Gunfire would frighten them; they might turn and stampede down the trail toward the drowning water, or be brushed off the walls to break backs and necks in the Big Dry canyon.

Dan McGee stepped off his horse. He released the calf and instantly it wobbled over to its anxious mother and she muzzled it anxiously while the hungry little critter sought its first meal of the day. Then, with wire cutters in hand, Dan stepped up to the fence.

As the first wire parted with a resounding *whang*, Simms opened fire with the rifle. The first was apparently a sighting shot, for Dan heard the whisper of the bullet passing over his head. His cattle were close at his back, eager to pass on to dry ground and buffalo grass. Dan bent and caught the second barbed wire strand with his cutters. Simms' gun slammed like an iron door and sawdust flew from a nearby cedar fence post.

The big chinook was roaring its dirge overhead and Dan McGee decided grimly that would be the last sound of the open range he'd ever hear. He took a last look around him for he hated to leave the hills and the river country where he had wept over and buried his parents. But he knew that if he died the next moment, he'd *live long enough* to cut the last wire and let his cattle through.

At this close range, now that he had planted his sighting shots Simms surely wouldn't miss with the third. Dan's roving eyes turned toward the angry old rifleman down in front of the sheepwagon. He saw Nancy come running around the wagon from a tepee that had been set up some distance in the rear. Her tawny hair gleamed and rippled the in the sunlight; she rushed her father and siezed the rifle barrel.

"Out of my way, girl!" Simms roared, and whipped away the rifle. With a scream, Nancy rushed him a second time. But Simms, barely touching the stock to his shoulder, fired his third shot at the man crouching over the lowest strand of wire.

Dan felt the white-hot burn of the bullet plunging into the calf of his leg. Thus his father had been shot in that wild race toward the land office. He bent over and was assailed by a mighty weakness. The wire cutters flew from his nerveless hand, and he went rolling down the slope for ten feet to bring up against a rock. But as he crashed into the boulder, he heard the *whang* of the wire, and knew that the hate fence had been cut and his cattle were again on the march.

The chinook drone died away in his ears and he felt limp and giddy. He put his back to the rock and saw that he was soaked with his own hot blood. He squirmed about weakly and stared down the slope. Simms was doing a war dance in front of the wagon, an angry dance, and yelling at his daughter who was climbing up to where Dan lay.

"*Come back,*" ordered Simms, "or I'll get you both!"

But Nancy, reaching Dan, bent over him and her loosened hair brushed his face. He was gritting his teeth against shock and weakness. He gasped out. "You can't do *anything*, Nancy, I'm goin' fast—" and then. "Did my cattle get through?"

SHE DIDN'T answer; she tore the silk scarf from her neck

and twisted it into a thin hard binding, a tourniquet above the bullet hole in his calf from which Dan's life was being pumped away at each beat of his heart. She tied the knot. But something must be inserted to twist the tourniquet until it cut deeply into flesh and shut off the flow of blood.

The barrel of the six-shooter served. The girl jerked the gun from Dan's holster. Then she closed his right hand above the stock. "Hang to it," she ordered; "Don't let that knot unwind or you may die quick. I'll bring down your horse. We'll get out of here!"

The big rock shielded him from Simms' gunfire. With right hand gripping the gunstock, Dan raised up and looked over its top. He saw a strange sight. Old Simms was crawling atop the sheepwagon, hopeful that from its roof, he could get elevation and throw a killing slug into Dan McGee.

But on beyond the sheepwagon and bitter-hearted Simms on the roof. Dan McGee saw another and more terrifying sight. Above the shelf where the wagon stood, Big Dry Creek widened out into a quarter mile of gravel wash. At the far end of the wash, gleaming with a yellowish light under the sun and fanged with rocks and driftwood, a flash flood was roaring straight down the Big Dry. It would jump the creek banks and carry the sheepwagon and Nancy's father down into the Big Dry canyon.

The girl came down to Dan just then leading the good horse, Buck. Dan shouted weakly, "Look up the creek! High water rollin'!"

Nancy knew what that approaching foamy wall of water indicated; death for her stubborn old father. She dropped Buck's reins and rushed down the hill, screaming a warning. At her first cry, Simms shook his head and shouted an angry retort. Then he turned to look up the creek and *it was too late.* The flash flood drove across the shelf, throwing uprooted cottonwoods and blocks and honeycombed ice ahead. It picked up the wagon and carried it down toward the head of the canyon. With Simms clinging to the canvas cover and *knowing* that he was headed for sure death.

Above the screaming of the girl, the roaring of the flood and the drone of the big Chinook, the pounding of a horse's hoofs boomed on the hollow earth.

The sheepwagon was heaved toward a pile of rocks at the canyon entrance and hung for a quivering moment of eternity before wild water forced it into the death plunge.

A RIDER sat straight in the saddle of a buckskin horse and shot his lariat noose across thirty feet of stormy boiling floodwater.

"Simms!" he yelled. "Simms! Grab the loop! *And hang on!*"

Old Simms looked through the spray and knew that he must not miss the loop thrown his way by an enemy. He got one skinny arm through it. He was dragged, ashore, half drowned, the rope cutting into his scrawny body. He still clung with his left hand to his rifle.

Simms sat up and belched out a quart of Big Dry water. He saw Dan McGee flat on his back. The right leg of Dan's overalls was red as though splashed with barn paint. Nancy bent over Dan, then she turned and raked the rifle away from her father's numbed hands.

"He let go of the gun!" she cried, "and he nearly bled to death riding down to save you!"

Simms didn't know what his daughter was talking about.

"Gun?" he quavered, for the flood had taken the wire edge off his nerves. "Gun for *what?*"

"Gun he should've killed you with and didn't. Well, here's a better use for the gun you wanted to kill *him* with!" And Nancy thrust the barrel of her father's rifle through the knot of the tourniquet on Dan McGee's leg. And began to twist.

THE END

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DIGGER JOHN'S ROUND TRIP

by A. A. Baker

(author of "Digger John and the Pygmy")

"Digger John, cow killer! Goes huntin' for deer and draws down three of the four cows in the whole danged mountains!" The laugh was on Digger John, this time, but Digger had more than ridicule to face. For if he couldn't bring in another cow pronto, a baby, and Digger's pardner, Bomar, would die . . .

WINTER had come early in the Sierras and the snow settled over the mountain town of Gold Run like the tiers of frosting on a massive wedding cake. The citizens had dug out so many times that the streets and walks were at half a dozen levels; each level designated by its layer of soot and debris that collected between the frequent snow falls. Several cave-ins had trapped unwary walkers and every citizen had a tale to tell of being buried alive.

The heavy snowfalls were usually followed by icy winds that blew the powdered snow with such fury that a man's whiskers and eyebrows would congeal. The bitter cold sought out a traveler's lungs and it was wise to avoid the chill by hanging firmly onto a bar and grimly exercise by lifting tin cups of redeye.

Dredger's Dan's *Hotel and Bar* was packed with miners, all protecting themselves from lung fever with Dredger's redeye medicine. The round stove blasted heat from orange sides and the manzanita logs shot flames up the crooked chimney until the blackening smoked and the blue-eyed cat moved her litter of kittens way back on the rafter. The sawdust was streaked with red mud from miners' boots and Slim Deakins, the honest gambler, moodily bent his heated poker chips into children's whistles.

Digger John spat a brown, golden stream of tobacco against the searing stove and grumbled, "A poker chip whistle, and a pine needle doll is the best them kids'll git this Christmas!" He moved heavily across the floor and the barrel chair creaked as he sat his great weight down.

Slim nodded, his thin face glum. "With the heavy snow, nobody can get in or out. With the mines shut down early, and every ounce of dust spent on food or liquor. Men can't log, can't mine, can't hunt, can't do anything but watch the blasted snow. And," Slim ran his tongue around his cheek while he drilled a delicate hole in the bent chip, "it looks like we've got two, three months more before winter'll even think of quiting!"

Digger leaned back, and with a hairy hand, brushed the steam from a window and glared at the icicles. "Seen Bomar?"

"Not since last night," answered the gambler. "He's been out trying to locate that cow. Since yesterday."

Digger ducked beneath his big hat at the word cow. The room stilled and all turned bleak looks on the big miner. Harry Jimpson, his sandy head thrust forward, threateningly snarled. "Digger John, cow killer! Goes huntin' for deer and draws down three of the four cows in the whole danged mountains! I bin around for a long time, but she's the

Digger grabbed a bungstarter and belabored the brass gaboon on Jimpson's head until it rang like a fire bell.

fust time I ever heard of a deer hunter shootin' three cows!" Jimpson was ugly and spoiling for a fight. The mountain chill had curdled his blood and the long storm halted his mining operations until he was ready to tangle with the devil himself.

Digger tried a weak half grin. "Cows got horns an' when yore eyebrows is covered with ice and the powder snow is blowin', anything with horns looks like deer. How was I to know thet Murray's cows was broke out?"

Jimpson sneered and Digger's voice hardened. "Yew bin braggin' me long enough about them cows! I done wrong, I admit it! But, if'n yew keep it up, I'm goin'..."

The mine owner interrupted, "Then get goin'; yore a fightin' man, git off yore coat an' let's have at..."

THE MEN were startled by a heavy pounding at the oak storm

doors. They heard a muffled shout and Dredger Dan hurried over and opened the door. Two ice caked men stumbled in, carrying the limp body of a pint-sized, red headed, Indian.

A poker table was slid close to the stove and the mud caked body was laid on the green felt. The little man was a sight to behold. From the bottom of his small feet, to the top of his red hair, he was encased in an armour of mud and the fire steamed the moisture until he looked like a baked red brick. His breath was labored and as Digger scrapped the crusted mud from his flushed face, Bomar's skin turned purple. Digger worked fast and soon the mud was cleared away and the thin body of the pigmy went into a convulsion.

The men backed away with helpless gestures and Digger roared in a cracked voice. "It's lung fever! The little fella's gotta be hurried to bed and'll need some strong nursin'! I seen a lot of it in the epidemic over to Georgetown. Men died alongside the sluiceboxes like flies. It was the biggest strike in these parts an' every man was out to git his. Dredger, make ready a bed an' somebody get Bullwhip Annie in here sudden!"

Bomar was tucked away in a bed that fit him like a mother's corset fits a six-year-old play acting daughter. He hacked out a couple of dry coughs and the men tiptoed out and left him in care of the woman teamster.

As the men clustered in the bar, Digger talked moodily. "The little fella's gotta git well. He's too smart sometimes, with his tricks an' devilment, but they's all in fun. Thet trick of packin' hisself with a coat of mud is an old California Indian trick; keeps the heat of the body in an' the wind out. If'n he hadn't of done thet, he'd been found froze stiff!"

"Jest like the cow he was huntin!" gritted Jimpson. "One dead Indian don't make no difference, but that cow was necessary for the kids..."

Digger's face became rigid. "Yew cold-blooded rattlesnake! Yew don't care if'n Bomar dies; all yew got to growl about is a dead cow! Let's jest see how fast a rattler can strike!" Without hesitation, Digger bent over and scooped up a brass spittoon and cranned it snugly over Jimpson's head! While the mine owner frantically clawed at the hood, Digger grabbed a bungstarter and belabored the brass gaboon until it rang like a fire bell, then with a rush, he jammed the victim through the door and smashed him head first into a snowbank! The big miner was so mad when he returned to the bar, he upended a bottle of ginger beer and drained it before he realized it wasn't whiskey.

The men sat through the night and listened to the hacking coughs from the room at the head of the stairs. They pestered Bullwhip Annie until she merely grunted as she passed through on her errands. Digger, Slim, and Dredger Dan sat at the poker table and morosely talked.

"'Member the night Bomar got stuck in the rafters?" Dredger reminisced. "He hid up there until I closed the place an' then come down an' chewed up all thet dried wild rice? Then he drank so much water, thet he swelled up an' we hadda saw the rafter out to free him?"

The men grinned reflectively. "An' the time," added Digger, "Harry Jimpson gave him a big chinee firecracker for a cigar. The little fella didn't like the taste an' handed it back to Harry jest 'fore it went off an' Jimpson lost the tips of two fingers?"

"Yew treated Jimpson pretty rough, Digger, grunted Dredger Dan. "He's a hard man an he'll git back at yew if'n he can. All them mines he holds is givin' him a sense of importance thet'll make him figger he's been hu-mil-ated."

"Where'd he go?" asked Deakins.

"After the blacksmith got him outa that gaboon—an' by the way Digger, I've added the cost of one brass spittoon onto yore account—Jimpson borrowed a pair of snowshoes an' struck out fer Colfax. Sez he's gotta bring in some newfangled nozzle reducer thet's to give the hy-

draulic lines more force. Thet buzzard can't wait fer the work to start. Sometime after Christmas, the snow'll melt under a heavy rain an' them reservoirs'll fill up sudden an' them hydraulic crews'll start tearin' into Murray's pasture."

BULLWHIP ANNIE clumped down the stairs and the three men stared apprehensively. Her face was gray as she stood staring at the men. Tucking a wisp of stringy hair back under her mexican comb, she gritted, "The worse case of lung fever I ever seen! He's delirious an', I'm thinkin', gonna cash in. Must'a been out in the snow all night. Them tough little fellas don't give up an' he must'a figured his strength too close."

Digger cursed. "Them danged cows! He figgered it was necessary to find thet last cow, so's the Thompson's new baby wouldn't want! Then, I guess he figgered if'n he could find thet last cow, the Thompsons wouldn't feel so hard 'bout me mistakin' them cows fer deer..." Frantically, he ran big hands through his tousled hair. "The little fella done too much an' is dyin' 'cause of tryin' to held a friend!"

Bullwhip Annie snorted. "If'n he'd found the cow alive, at least we'd had some nourishment to help him git well! Needs nothin' more than good nursin' an' nourishment. Nothin' better than warm cow's milk to hold a man's strength 'til he reaches the crisis."

Dredger frowned. 'Ain't nothin' left for food 'ceptin' salt horse beans, an' whiskey, in the whole town. The teamster wagon's can't git through. Toll road's blocked below Colfax with slides. So's the steam trains. They never was any good in the snow, an' the tracks is filled in solid, almost to Auburn. They ain't *any* way to git a cow into this country until the winter breaks. Bomar an' Thompson's new baby is jest about out'a luck!"

"Deer an' all the eatin' ani-mules has left the high parts an' is way down to Marysville country," muttered Digger. "Ain't seen a deer for over a month, 'til them cows what looked like deer. Can't find a bear in this heavy snow, they's buried so deep they won't come out 'til July. The dawgs ketch a bush rabbit now an' again, but they got it tore up 'fore yew kin grab it away from them. The Injuns over in Flatrock is eatin' their buckskin clothes, makin' stew out'a the skin!" He frowned, then banged the table until Slim's chips scattered onto the floor.

"But," Digger's voice lowered grimly, "if'n Bomar an' the Thompson's kid needs a cow, then they'll git a cow! I've seen a lot of men die in California. Any time they's a fortune at stake, it don't seem so bad fer a man to die tryin' to find it, or take it away from another man. But, when poor little Bomar, who don't give a hang fer gold, and a little baby who don't know what it is, is dyin' 'cause of they ain't no cow, then I gotta do somethin' to get them a cow!"

Fury stiffened John's shoulders as he strode to the door, his legs moving with stiff speed toward his adobe. Half an hour later, Slim and Dredger stood in the tearing wind and watched Digger flounder through the soft snow, toward the toll road. As they reentered the bar, Slim spoke feelingly. "There's no man alive can buck that storm through to Colfax and back! Yet, on the other hand, there's no man alive could stop that big mountain man from starting out and trying to get through. My brain knows he won't make it, but if there's enough fighting strength in any human body to beat the storm and return alive, Digger John's that man!"

Dredger Dan poured a shaky drink and nodded with a gruff clearing of his throat.

BEFORE Digger was a hundred yards away from Gold Run, his lungs were burning with the strain of driving his big legs through the top layer of powdered snow. His snowshoes clogged and his tracks were three feet deep. The snow whipped at his exposed face until the ice formed on his stubby whisk-

ers and froze over his eyebrows. He huddled over the lee of a windfall and rested, cursing the ten miles he had to go. While he waited, his body stiffened with the cold and he pondered his plight. The snowshoes needed more surface. Digger cut strips from his buckskin blouse, and with clumsy fingers, wove more strands through the rackets. When he resumed, his tracks were not so deep and his progress better.

The hours passed, and Digger John floundered on. He held, whereever possible, to the wind swept ridges and took the full brunt of the wind with distainful fury. He mouthed curses at the raging storm, curses that held the tempo of prayer as each aching step took him closer to Colfax. He passed the deserted, burnt out site of Secret Town, and felt hope stir in his heart. It was all down drag now, if he could keep his legs moving. If he didn't fall through a soft place and lack the strength to claw his way out. His mind wandered; his fuddled brain told him that he was going the wrong way; but his legs held stubbornly to a predestined course and he watched the manzanita brush and knew from its smaller branches that he was still descending toward his goal.

THE ROADHOUSE gang in Colfax huddled over a card game and fought the cold with a snort from a bottle and the fire from a stranded engine. They stared in amazement as a snow covered, staggering brute of a man, weakly swung back the door and stood staring; too weak to walk, and too tough to fall down! They led Digger to the fire and poured him a cup of whiskey. He drank deeply then shuddered delightedly, as a dog shudders in pure pleasure when you scratch him on the small of the back, then passed the cup back for a refill.

As Derail Hoskins put it later. "Digger was so froze up, so covered with wet snow, I figured the whiskey would run outa his seams like a whiskey barrel thet's bin layin' out in the sun! Then, he finished thet bottle an' the fust words he said was, 'Whar kin I buy a cow?'"

Digger found his cow at the livery barn. She had been shipped in from Marysville by train and had been living fat at the stable because the roads to Dutch Flat were blocked. Digger looked her over and measured her carefully. His path from the stable led him to a harness maker back of the hotel and when he returned he carried a harness with hand holds. The harness fit snugly around Bossy's chest and flank. The hand grips protruded from each side. John smiled thinly, then trudged to the hotel and slept for a solid twelve hours.

Digger rose, and the bunk creaked as heavily as his stiffened body. He glared out at the weather and the storm glared back with the added insult of a derisively windy whistle. He faced ten miles of uphill hell, with close to seven hundred pounds of stubborn cow to haul and push through a blizzard. He thought back over the horror of his recent trip and his legs ached until his spine weakened and he sat on the bunk. Then anger shook him and he cursed until his broad shoulders straightened, then rose and stomped down to the bar room.

The men in the bar room quieted at his entrance, and turned away, in the manner of people who realized they were going to be asked to do something they had no stomach for. The bartender broke an egg in a cup of raw whiskey and passed it to the silent man. He drank deep and his blue eyes roved over each man, as though weighing them for courage.

His voice was low, but the words hung heavy in the smoky air. "Gonna need three men. Men—not boys—to do a job thet's got to be done. Means hauling a seven hundred pound cow all the way to Gold Run. Can't wait 'till the storm's over. A baby an' a pigmy Injun is gonna be dead by the time this storm's over if'n we don't git thet cow up there. Bomar's got lung fever an' the baby needs milk." Digger waited, and his

blue eyes blazed into Trapper Murphy's.

"Got a trap line run up that-away, Digger." The husky, slow moving man edged away from the bar and stood by the stairs. "Needs lookin' at. Was figurin' to head out today anyhow, might as well have yore company!"

Digger turned his eyes down the bar and spoke again. "Snowshoe, yew got anythin' yew was goin' to do today?"

"Waitin' fer the mail, to take up to Dutch Flat," Snowshoe Johnson muttered. "Don't look like it's comin' in, so jest as well go back with you." Suddenly, he grinned. "Deliverin' mail. Fe-mail—get it, Digger?" The men in the bar chuckled sympathetically, like small boys daring a youngster to pick flowers in the graveyard at midnight.

"I'm gonna join yew, for jest one reason!" The snarling shout boomed out from a corner table and Digger turned to stare at Harry Jimpson. "For jest one reason! It can't be done an' I'm gonna go along 'cause I want to see you walk into Gold Run without thet cow an' be there to watch thet Injun die!" He stood up and gritted, "Well, let's get thet cow and get to startin'!" Jimpson hefted a haversack over his shoulder and led the way out into the blistering snow.

NIGHTFALL found the four tired, half-frozen men, about half way between Gold Run and hell! They had a fire going and the blankets wrapped around Bossy were steaming in the quiet of the deadfall. The wind snarled around the fire and the men huddled down on a broad, charred log and stared silently. Bossy lowed softly as she moved her rump closer to the heat and hung her head in exhaustion.

Trapper stared at his bloody wrist and muttered, "She's a long haul yet!" His shoulder ached from the steady long pull of hauling bossy through drifts, over boulders and up the sides of canyons. He silenced and listened to the ranting of Harry Jimpson.

"Digger, yore crazy! The only thing to do, is let the cow go an' git out'a here, if...an' I mean if... we can! Yew're lost! Murphy hasn't seen one of his traps all day!"

Digger shrugged. "We *might* be lost, but by my figurin'. we're headin' in the right direction. Murphy's trap line is buried an' the snow's changed the whole country. Snowshoe ain't quittin' an' he's jest as tired as the rest of us. Anyway, they ain't no use worryin' 'bout dyin', nobody lives foreever! Hey, Murphy?"

"Thet's true, Digger," answered the trapper. "But she's fun tryin'. Fella I know, named Smokey, used to say; 'If'n a man dies on his feet, tryin' to get somethin' done, then he's got a head start gettin' to heaven, 'cause Saint Peter's got orders to let brave men in without checkin' their passport!' Smokey ought'a know, cause he's died four times an'..."

"You," shouted Jimpson angrily, "are as big a liar as Digger John! How could a man die four times?"

"Smokey's bin married to four widows, and he says," Trapper spat into the fire reflectively, "he was livin' dead each time." Digger laughed and addressed the furious Jimpson. "Hang thet blasted knapsack on a tree. It's dead weight an' yew'll have time to come after it some..."

"This knapsack," shouted Jimpson, "is goin' along with me!" His jaw jutted and he grabbed the leather hand hold on Bossy's withers.

Digger hooked onto the strap around Bossy's chest as the other two men climbed to their feet and grasped their hand holds and Bossy moved out. Her little feet churned frantically and she turned her wet nose and licked Digger's face with a dripping, rough, tongue. The wind caught the group as they left the comparative protection of the windfall and almost overbalanced the struggling men.

Four men and a cow began the battle against the vast stormy wilderness, in the thrall of a snow storm to make their shrouds white if they

failed. With each step they had to pull their boots free of the sucking whiteness that added weight on the buckskins of their webs. The wind threw powdered ice into their cold burned faces and screeched as it clustered in the hair below their hats. Little balls of ice clung to their eyelashes and caught under raw fingernails as they scrapped it away.

They struggled through the night, knowing that long rest would be fatal. They realized their only hope was to struggle on.

The storm moved landmarks at will and left the group in a vacuum of heavy snow. The web tracks of their passing were erased until time died behind them and their only salvation seemed to exist in the unknown fortunes of fate.

Jimpson ducked a snow piled buckbrush stalk and slipped into a moaning, fear laden heap, that halted the march. He lay on his side and screamed. "My leg...I heard it crack! We'll die...!"

The men planted Bossy in the snow and gazed, appalled, at the fallen man. They faced a dilemma that required quick decision. Three men could not get the cow the rest of the way, even if they were sure where Gold Run was. Jimpson could not be left in the snow, and if the cow were abandoned, Bomar and the baby would most likely die.

The snowpack above Jimpson began to slide and he frantically clawed to his feet as Digger shouted harshly, *"Listen! The church bell!"*

The men tried to stem the hiss of their strained breathing to listen. "Where?" Jimpson moaned. "I don't hear... Yes! Yes I do!"

The storm's lull passed and Jimpson lurched forward. As he passed Digger he was hauled back into line and the limp leather strap was pressed into his hand. Digger grunted, "Takes four men to handle this cow. Jest be patient, they'll hold the church services until we arrive!"

"How far do you figure now, Digger?" queried the patient Trapper Murphy.

"Can't be over a mile, or we wouldn't hear the bell! Jest hope the Preacher don't git tired ringin' it." Digger glanced around at the men to see if they were ready. "Lift her boys, an' let's take this cow to church!"

The tired men hoisted and staggered ahead. The sucking action of the snow held their webs until each step was a painfully studied manouver that required all their attention. The wind howled and shook the weighted branches until the clods of snow plunked down like gobs of wet dough. Their ears strained forward for a vagrant sound of the church bell and its muffled tone beckoned from one direction after another. Evasive as the hum of a mosquito in a dark room.

Bossy rolled big scared eyes and shook her head to dislodge the blast of the storm as the men topped the ridge of Cold Spring mountain and suddenly knew where they were! The chest of each man expanded in a sudden thankful breath and the grin of victory appeared on their tormented faces.

Snowshoe slapped the wet rump before him and howled joyfully. "Won't be long now 'til we deliver old Bossy special delivery! An..."

"The midnight march," interrupted the hoarse Digger, "of Bossy's two-legged, four-mule train will be over!"

"Bossy balked but..." began Trapper in jubilant glee, just as he slipped into a hole in the snow and was plunged neck deep. The other three men hung weakly to the cow and roared at his predicament. Trapper climbed out sheepishly, and the four men leaned a minute longer, grinning happily into each others crimson hued faces. Jimpson raised his voice in a shout. "Thank Gawd for that church bell! Let's get on in an' get this cow milked!"

THEY HIT the board walk and Bossy was let to her feet. She tripped down the mushy walk, as daintily as a queen, while her attendants shouted until bewildered heads poked out into the snowy air. Bossy greeted the craning heads with a whoozy moo, as she was lifted bodi-

ly and carried into the warm smoky room of Dredger's Bar.

Dredger rushed forward and, in a wild disregard of expense, that startled the bartender until he dropped the lid on the whiskey barrel and smashed his thumb, shouted; "Fill all the glasses with the best in the house!"

The four man mule train drank deep, holding firmly to the bar until Dredger Dan refilled their glasses. Then they turned, in unison, and leaned weary elbows on the polished wood.

Digger grinned at the multitude of questioning faces. "They ain't much to tell fellas. When I got into Colfax, these three fellas was comin' back this way an' decided to join me an' Bossy here." He directed his glass toward Bossy, who gazed fondly back at the big man.

"We blazed a new trail, shortcut, from Colfax to here." At the word 'shortcut' Digger's helpers smiled hollowly. "Got halfway lost a couple of times but..."

Jimpson grunted, "We was lost *all* the way! T'was the church bell ringin' thet brought us in. Without thet, we'd a died..." He paused in bewilderment as the crowd stilled and Slim Deakins spoke slowly. "The church bell hasn't rung since Bomar stole the clapper!"

"We heard it, don't tell me different!" shouted Jimpson and turned to Trapper Murphy for confirmation. Trapper stared blankly back at Jimpson and Snowshoe muttered. "How could we'a heard the church bell if'n it didn't have a clapper? Yew must'a been hearin' things!"

The roar of a river steamer ripped through the room and all the group jumped, then laughed sheepishly. Bullwhip Annie stumbled from Bomar's sick room. Her heavy face was flushed and a dust cap hung over one ear. Her eyes were wildly glaring toward Digger. "Get to milkin' thet cow, Digger!" she roared frantically. "Thet danged Pigmy is still delirious an' he's gotta be brought through the crisis soon or he'll have the whole danged town crazy! If it ain't a rattlesnake buzzin', or a grizzly roarin', it's a steamboat whistle he's imitatin'! Last night he was makin' like a church bell until the whole house shook..."

"Last night...?" Jimpson stared at Digger. "Bomar," Digger answered "is pretty good at thet bell ringin', but I got him beat!" He opened his lips slightly, took a deep breath, and exploded the room with the bong! bong! of a bell. He turned toward Jimpson and his mouth stretched wide.

Harry Jimpson stared around at Murphy and Snowshoe Johnson. They returned his stare with twinkling eyes. Then Jimpson smiled. "Yew knew there was no bell! Yew knew it was Digger all the time. Well, let's have a drink with a man that's about to eat his words!"

"'Fore we drink to eatin' words," spoke Digger John as he reached out a stubby toe and gently pushed over Jimpson's soggy knapsack, "let's drink to a fella who wanted to play Santa Claus!" The men stared down at the spilled harmonicas and dolls, then smiled in friendship at Harry Jimpson.

Harry flushed, then mumbled. "Poker chip whistles is fine for kids, but I jest figgered they needed a little extra!"

The men in the bar raised their glasses and from Bomar's room came the wild cry of a hyena. A good strong cry.

THE END

Cowpuncher — Gone to Seed

by Cliff Campbell

Hunkered there in darkness, old Frank Parkman wrestled with his conscience as he watched the bank-robbers at work. Why should he take a hand, a voice whispered. Hadn't his old friend of a hundred roundups and trail herds turned him down when he needed a measly thousand dollars? Hadn't he been taunted as a hopelessly outdated relic of days gone forever? Why should he risk his life to prove them all wrong? But could he sit by and do nothing?

FRANK PARKMAN had entered the *Longhorn Bar* in mid-forenoon of Wednesday. He had just emerged from a painful interview with Al Sherman, paying teller of the First National Bank of Amistad.

"I'm sorry," he said, in a tone indicating that he was anything but sorrowful. "Mr. Hopwood is out of town at present. And he left no word about any loan."

Parkman restrained his impulse to reach through the grille and grab Sherman by his scrawny throat. Parkman was restraining his natural impulses a lot these days, he reflected bitterly as he crossed the street to where his paint hoss was standing before the hitching-rack. Out at his ranch five cowboys were waiting for their pay, three months overdue. Five hundred and seventy-three head of cattle, some of them grass-fed and the rest scrawny brush splitters from Texas, must be put into some kind of condition for the market, or else they wouldn't bring enough to pay for shipping. It would take money for alfalfa and other finishing provender.

He was about to swing into the saddle when he paused. In the soiled window of the saloon directly before the hitching-rack was a green light, kept lighted night and day. It winked at Parkman significantly.

"Come on in," it said, plain as day. "Hoist a snifter or two and forget your troubles. What do you care, anyway?"

Parkman lowered his booted foot to the ground and considered. In his pocket were twenty-five dollars, the last of his cash reserve. What good was twenty-five dollars to a man with a starving herd and five disgruntled hands who wanted their pay? None at all. But it would buy several bottles of a certain liquid that might cheer him out of his slough of despond. Bill Hopwood had turned him down in his hour of need, hadn't he?

He had. There was no doubt of it whatever. Turned him down flat, on the measly loan of a thousand dollars he had asked for. Bill Hopwood, his range mate through many a stormy cattle year, had done this incredible thing!

It was eight feet from the spot where the paint hoss stood to the threshold under the low, swinging doors. Parkman crossed the space in two long strides and pushed open the doors. He fairly leaped across the floor to the pine bar, upon which he pounded with a horny fist.

"Whiskey!" he ordered.

The bartender set up a black bottle and a glass. Parkman poured himself a drink with a hand that trembled somewhat. His sombrero was shoved back as far as it would go without falling off, exposing a bald

head seamed and bronzed out of all resemblance to human hide. He tossed off the drink and poured out another.

"Want any water?" the bartender asked.

"I do not," responded Parkman promptly. "No chasers fer me this morning', hombre. I'm so dry I reckon it'll take about ten o' these babies to make a dent in my thirst. After that it'll take another ten to fill up th' dent."

He tossed off the second drink, then fumbled in his pants pocket and produced a twenty-dollar gold piece, spinning it on the bar. The bartender rescued it before it spun off to the floor.

"I'm buyin' this bottle," the patron informed him. "After that maybe I'll buy another; no tellin'. Any objections?"

"Nary an objection." The bartender flipped the shining coin into the till and tossed the change on the bar. "Like to set down at a table, Mr. Parkman?"

"Naw!" growled the old-timer. "I'll chamber my p'izen standin', same as I always did." He paid no attention to the change, pouring himself another drink. "Time enough to set down when I can't stand up no more."

The bartender retired to the end of the bar, where he had been conversing with the only other occupant of the saloon—a gentleman whose face would have won him employment as villain in a melodrama without any further recommendations.

"Who is th' old guy?" this individual asked.

"Him?" The bartender laughed softly. "That's old Frank Parkman. He's tryin' to be a ranchcher, but he ain't nothin' but a cowpuncher gone to seed. Every so often he has to git drunk an' irrigate his trouble patch. He'll keep that up till his cash runs out; you watch."

"How do yuh know?" the stranger asked, eyeing the stalwart form of the old puncher and the worn holster at his hip, housing an equally worn forty-five.

"Know?" echoed the knight of the towel. "I know by th' way he's startin' in, stranger. Heard him say he didn't want no chaser didn't yuh? Well, that means Parkman's embarked on a bender. He won't quit ontil his skin's so doggoned full it 'ud pop if somebody scratched it with a pin."

AS MIGHT be surmised, the interview with the paying teller was not the first Parkman had had relative to the loan he was seeking. It had been preceded by another one, that time with Bill Hopwood himself.

As Parkman stood at the pine bar and imbibed drink after drink of the fiery liquid, high lights in the conversation with the banker came back to him, bringing a flush to his bronzed cheeks and a blaze to his eyes. Bill Hopwood hadn't minced words. For that matter, he never did.

"Listen here, Frank," he said, after Parkman had made known his wants. "I don't see how the bank can loan you another cent. You're 'way past the limit now. You're into us three thousand, and your ranch isn't worth half that."

"How about my cows?" Parkman demanded aggrievedly. "They'll bring thirty a head, shore as shootin'."

But the banker shook his gray head. He was as bald as Old Frank, but there was a keener expression to his countenance, and his eyes were steadier. He wore a business suit as gray as his hair and eyes. In fact, he

was a sort of a symphony in gray, with the dignity that comes to a man who has lifted himself out of the rut and sees beyond the skyline of his own limitations.

"You're out of touch with things, Frank," he said. "If you weren't, you'd know the market has been off for two years, and will be off for a year longer at least. Your herd probably won't bring enough to pay off what you owe us already, after you've paid the freight and commission charges."

"It'll bring a good price if th' critters don't starve to death 'fore th' beef roundup," Parkman muttered. "All I need is enough money to git finishin' feed, Bill. Can't sell critters all ga'nted up like they be, kin I?"

"You ought to have thought of that before. The trouble with you is, you're still a cowpuncher, Bill. You haven't any head for business." The banker's tone was kindly but firm. "You can't stand prosperity. How old are you?"

"Fifty-seven. But what's that got to do with it?"

"A lot. I'm only a year older, and look where I am." Bill Hopwood took a justifiable pride in his achievements. "You and I started out together; used to get drunk together, and all that kind of thing.

"But the difference between us is that you've stayed where we both were in those days, while I've come ahead. Why?" The banker lighted a cigar and gazed at the other through the smoke. "Because I quit my fool cowpuncher ways; that's why— When were you drunk last, Frank?"

"Two or three weeks ago. But I don't see—"

"How long you been wearing that six-gun?"

Parkman looked down at the worn holster, with the worn gun butt protruding from it.

"More'n forty years, I reckon," he stated with pride. "That there gun—"

"I know," interrupted the banker hastily. "It's got a history. You hang on to it as though you needed it; while as a matter of fact you haven't needed a gun for twenty years, and you know it. Don't you know—can't you see—that times have changed?"

Parkman was used to these lectures. They invariably preceded the handing out of the requested loan by his old friend.

"That's all right, Bill," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Maybe times have changed. I ain't saying they ain't. But this here gun stays right on my hip—savvy? Reminds me of th' old days, when you an' me used to wake up in th' mornin' on th' trail an' crawl out of our blankets an' tarps stiff-legged, fer fear a rattler or two might have crawled in with us in th' night. Remember that time Zeke Taylor stuck his hand in that hole after a cotton tail, an' hauled it out ag'in with a rattler hangin' onto his thumb? You had to slash th' place where he was bit with yore knife, didn't yuh? An' touch it off with powder yuh shook out of a shell."

It was thus that Parkman had wheedled loans out of Hopwood before. The banker's gray eyes were already tinged with the gleam of reminiscence as he listened.

"The plains were alive with rattlesnakes, weren't they?" he said musingly.

"Was they!" Parkman smacked his lips. "An' tarantulas, an' horned toads, an' Gila monsters. Them babies looked right mean, but that's as far as it went— Remember th' time I dropped th' toad in that tenderfoot's lap while he was eatin' his supper? He let out a yell I kin hear yet, if I listen right hard."

They chuckled together at the recollection. Then the banker sobered.

"That was thirty-odd years ago, Frank," he then reminded. "Times have changed. You ought to leave that gun off. It's symbolic of the dead past. That's the trouble with you—you live in the past too much. Come up to date."

But Parkman patted the ancient weapon affectionately, a stubborn set to his grizzled jaws.

"This here gun stays with me," he stated. "Right on my right hip. An' when th' spirit moves me to h'ist a few drinks of red-eye, I reckon I'll have to pay attention to it, Bill. A

few drinks can't hurt an ol' rawhide like me— How about that loan?"

"I'll have to think about it. Take it up with my board of directors." Parkman grinned. He had heard that talk about "the board of directors" before. "Come in Wednesday."

PARKMAN went out still grinning. He and his old range mate had staged such conversations before. The pull of boyhood friendships is strong, especially when the boyhoods have been spent under the wide-flung skies of the cattle country, in the blood-stirring days of huge round-ups and hard riding. Hopwood would come across with the money.

But he hadn't. That much was plain. Out of town, was he? Parkman sneered into his glass. He had drained an even dozen of them, but his hand was even steadier than when he started, and his blue eyes were merely a more intense indigo than before. Out of town—and leaving word with a pop-eyed maverick of a tenderfoot that there was nothing doing in the line of a loan.

"He sez times has changed," Parkman muttered into his gray mustache. "Well, they has. They shore has, when a gent that used to be able to look a gun plumb in th' eye an' talk to it has to go out o' town when a friend o' his'n needs a little money. Wish't I'd 'a' pulled that hump-nosed little runt through th' winder an' kicked him back in. That's what I wish."

It might not be too late yet, he reflected. He drank another glass of whiskey, then patted the holster on his hip. It was nearing noon, but thus far he had remained almost the only customer. The evil-faced stranger had vanished, and the bartender was reading a tattered copy of a magazine at the end of the bar. Outside the sun poured down on Amistad's main street and made the white dust seem even whiter and more dazzling to the unsheltered eye. A Mexican sheepherder, in town for the day, slept snoringly in the sun, propped up against the front of an adobe house. The heat was terrific; even inside the Longhorn the air was uncomfortably stuffy. The little adobe jail, flanked by the sheriff's office, was just across the street. The bank building was at the other end of the thoroughfare.

Throughout the long afternoon, while the sun rode steadily across the brassy sky and descended slowly toward its bed in the Rockies, twenty miles away, Parkman's paint hoss dozed patiently in front of the pitching-rack. It stood on three legs, its bony back humped dispiritedly, its stringy tail drooping in the white dust. And inside the saloon Parkman continued to stand up to the bar, "chambering" his whiskey and thinking about his wrongs.

During the evening a few cowmen and miners dropped in, drank their liquor and went out again. Among them were several strangers; but Parkman heeded them not. The evil-faced individual who had been talking with the bartender came in twice, called for whiskey, tossed it off and went out again. The saloon was inadequately lighted with smoky oil lamps; the poker and faro tables were for the most part untenanted and silent.

At midnight the old cattleman was still drinking with extraordinary steadiness. At one o'clock in the morning he and the bartender were the only occupants of the place, even the game tenders having called it a day and departed. At two o'clock

the bartender approached his sole customer, yawning ostentatiously.

"Gotta close up now," he announced. "Yuh'll have to take that bottle outside, Mr. Parkman, if yuh want to finish it."

Parkman looked at him. His eyes were as steady as when he entered.

"Since when?" he demanded.

"Always close er' up at two o'clock," the bartender explained apologetically. "Times ain't what they used to be."

"I see they ain't." The last of the change of his twenty-five dollars having been deposited in the till, the old cowman picked up the bottle and strode through the swinging doors. The bartender locked the door after him; in a moment the illumination inside went out. Parkman found his paint hoss at the rack; the little beast whinnied softly in the darkness and nuzzled him with a velvet nose.

"Pore little cuss! You an' me is behind th' times, I reckon." Parkman balanced the bottle in his horny right hand, uplifted it and drained it. He dropped the "dead soldier" into the soft dust soundlessly. "Well, I reckon we might as well be makin' tracks to th' ranch."

He climbed into the saddle by the sense of touch, raked the little beast lightly with his spurs and started up the street. Presently he found himself under a row of spruce trees, which lined the upper part of the street on both sides. There were needles under the trees, forming a thick carpet upon which the hoofs of the paint hoss made no sound. Parkman was ruminating as he rode, ducking his head to avoid contact with the branches overhead.

"Th' boys'll be disappointed," he muttered. "Well, they'll jest have to be, I reckon. Life ain't all beer an' skittles. Can't have everything our own way." The liquor he had drunk made him philosophical, for the moment. But the sight of the bank building, with its night light burning inside, drove all philosophy out of his mind and brought back his wrongs with a rush. There was no moon, and the stars made a billion pinpoints overhead. He reined in and stared at the glimmer in the banking room.

"SO TIMES has changed!" he muttered, shaking a big fist at the light. "Out o' date, I am. Oughta quit wearin' a gun, I had. Oughta learn th' art o' gittin' out o' town an' leavin' word with tenderfeet what tuh tell to my friends when they need money. That's what I oughta do—"

He paused and stiffened in his saddle. As if divining his thought the paint hoss stopped dead in its tracks. It started to whinny; instantly Parkman clapped his fingers across the velvet nose, and the whinny died a-borning.

Something was moving in the dark shadow of the bank building, just outside the faint light cast by the lamp within. The old cattleman caught a sound like the soft stamping of hoofs. Then, unmistakably, a horse snorted. The snort was stifled in midsection as by a hand ruthlessly grasping equine nostrils, and to the keen ears of the old rancher came a soft curse, so light as scarcely to register upon his ear-drums. Absolute silence followed.

Without moving a muscle the watcher continued to stare at the glimmer of light within the bank building. He had not long to wait. He was in a direct line with the door, and in a moment he was certain he saw the portal open, the casing for an instant shutting off the direct flow of the light's rays. A hulking figure was momentarily outlined against the light. Then another hulking figure was outlined—two of them—three!

In that instant old Frank Parkman became cold sober. The bank was being robbed! His hand fell instinctively to where his forty-five sagged at his right hip, and he grasped the butt of the weapon with fingers that had lost none of their strength with the passage of the years. From his vantage place he could pick off at least two of the hulking figures across the street, possibly three, before they awoke to the realization that anything was afoot. That, at

least would frustrate the robbery. The First National always carried something like forty thousand dollars in its vault, he knew; his old friend had often told him so. He could prevent the haul, and easily save his own skin in the darkness.... Noiselessly he drew forth the forty-five and pulled a bead on one of the hulking figures, dimly outlined against the feeble rays of the night light.

But he did not pull the trigger. Instead, he paused, grunted softly and lowered the gun. Something within him had spoken.

"Why should you do it?" the something within asked the old cattleman. "Why should you do anything to save the bank's cache?"

WHILE HE sat there under the spruce trees he battled with himself. He could prevent the robbery; but why should he? Hadn't his old friend of a hundred roundups and trail herds turned him down when he needed a measly thousand dollars? Hadn't he? Parkman trembled in the saddle, grasping the ancient forty-five, and stared hard at the shadowy bank building being invaded by the skulking robbers.

He was certain he knew the identity of the band. It was the Thompson gang, who holed up in Rockies somewhere, secure from pursuit, after their raids. There were not less than a dozen of them. They worked under cover of darkness, usually gaining entrance to the bank building and blowing the safes or vault doors with nitro-glycerine, then escaping to the fastness of their mountain retreat. Rufe Thompson, an outlaw, headed the gang... Why should he risk his own skin to do Bill Hopwood and his crowd of money worms a favor?

He muttered an oath and prepared to leave the scene as soon as expedient. His gun was back in its holster. Amistad slumbered in absolute silence. The robbers were working noiselessly; he could see a form flit before the glimmering light now and then. He grinned mirthlessly in the darkness.

"Go to it, hombres," he muttered. "Git all yuh kin. I don't blame yuh none. Clean out th' hull nest, fer all that I keer."

He was turning his mount about, preparatory to silent departure, when a dull roar assailed his ears, and the interior of the bank was lighted for an instant as by a flash of lightning. In that instant he caught a glimpse of a group of horses standing bunched in front of the building, their ears cocked, some of them with human figures in the saddles. His own presence remained undetected.

The vault door had been blown open, without doubt. It would be but a matter of seconds before the thieves, their loot safely in their possession, would be out of the bank and on their horses, galloping toward their mountain retreat. Once there they would be safe. Parkman was even confident he knew the route they would take—the Coyote Canyon road, a straight gash into the foothills, lined upon either side with unscalable cliffs of red granite. Only one way of circumventing them, once they got into Coyote Canyon...

Even as the invisible thieves swarmed through the door and vaulted into their saddles it came to Parkman—Eagle Pass! It circled around and joined Coyote Canyon halfway through the foothills. The thunder of hoofs apprised him that the bandits were galloping up the street, headed for the open country toward the mountains. A sudden revulsion of feeling came over the old cattleman, and he swore fervently, shaking his head as though to clear it of the lingering fumes of liquor. It would take time to form a posse; the sheriff would be too late to do anything—unless.

The paint hoss sprang forward like an unleashed spring as its rider's spurs sank into its flanks. The sheriff's office was at the other end of the street in the opposite direction from that taken by the flying bank robbers. Parkman pulled up before it, the paint hoofs sliding in the dust, and pounded on the door with the butt of his forty-five.

"Bank's jest been robbed!" he shouted, without waiting for an an-

swer to the summons. "They're headed fer Coyote Canyon. Come runnin', pronto!"

The pony whirled as on a pivot and dashed back the way it had just come. Dawn had already begun to whiten the east behind them, heralding a daylight that would be upon them within an hour. The sheriff shouted out half-asleep, mumbled reply as he tumbled out of his bunk and reached instinctively for his brace of revolvers that hung just over his head. The drum of the distant hoofbeats had already died out as Parkman, his pulses racing almost as fast as his pony, topped the first rise out of town and tore into the hollow beyond. He was chasing a desperate gang of robbers. If he should by any chance catch up with them it would be up to him to play a lone hand.

Nevertheless, he did not falter. He was even grinning with anticipation as, in the faint light of the oncoming dawn, he discerned a break in the road ahead and turned suddenly to the right. Presently he was galloping along a winding road that was hardly more than a trail, with a "hogback" rising between him and the road he had quitted. The stars were disappearing in groups, unable to complete with the stronger glow east. The paint's ears were cocked and its breath was coming and going like the even strokes of a piston. Parkman leaned forward and patted the hairy neck.

"Go it, yuh ol' son-of-a-gun," he crooned. "Run like hell, yuh cussed limb o' Satan. I'll stack you agin all th' hosses between the Mississippi an 'the Rockies, when it comes tuh kickin' th' trail out behind yuh."

AND, INDEED, it seemed that Parkman's faith was not misplaced. The paint flew over the trail, snorting with sheer joy of the express-train pace. The old cattleman swayed easily to the undulations of the animal. legs held stiffly in their stirrups, chin thrust forward, hat brim blowing back from his face. Several times he drew forth the old forty-five and examined its well oiled cylinder in the growing light.

Far within the foothills, where the mountains were too steep to permit leaving the trail, the road turned in a wide circle, following a dry creek bed. Around this bend horse and rider flew with undiminished speed, despite the steady rise of the ground underneath. Presently the rider uttered a grunt of satisfaction; the trail widened out ahead and appeared to come to an end in a high, precipitous wall. In another minute the old man had reined in and was searching the gulch into which he had ridden.

He had not long to wait. A hundred yards down the trail occurred a sharp bend, and presently around this appeared the vanguard of a group of horsemen, trotting leisurely. By the time they came in sight Parkman had dismounted and was leveling his forty-five across the saddle, taking careful aim.

They did not observe him in the growing light until a shot from his gun had announced his presence. Coyote Canyon was narrow at this point; it would be impossible to rush the lone disputant of the trail en masse. They drew up, startled, and the cattleman's bass voice echoed in the canyon as he spoke.

"Better surrender, boys," was his astounding ultimatum. "I'm holdin' this pass, I reckon, an' yuh can't go back without runnin' into the sheriff's posse. Stay right where yuh are, or I'll have tuh let this old smoke wagon o' mine loose. She's shore r'arin' tuh go."

But Rufe Thompson's gang was not made of surrendering stuff, apparently. Hardly were the words out of his mouth before one of the robbers in front jerked up his rifle and fired. The paint grunted once and promptly folded up, its legs moving spasmodically for a moment only. The old cowman sprang back alertly as the horse's body rolled over; then he ducked to a sprawled shelter behind it, between the now still legs, and leveled his long-barreled forty-five across the carcass.

The old gun belched, and the robber who had killed the horse was

swept out of the saddle as by a sudden puff of cyclonic wind. Promptly a fusillade followed. Parkman lay quietly behind the horse until it had subsided; then, with a chuckle, he raised his head cautiously and again sighted. And a second horseman was unseated.

Others were crowding up from around the bend. It was a testimonial to the old cowman's accuracy of shooting that they drew back out of range, a maneuver which seemed to trouble him not at all. He chuckled again.

"Stay there as long as yuh feel like it," he called jovially. "Sheriff'll be along pretty soon, an' then yuh'll have yore hands full. I aim tuh see that yuh don't come this way—not as long as this here arsenal o' mine holds out."

It was strong talk; but it may be mentioned in passing that the old cattleman was feeling strong. His was the strength of desperation. Back at his ranch five cowboys were waiting for their pay. A herd of five hundred and seventy-three grass-fed steers and Texas brush splitters were waiting for their finishing provender. There was no money for either, and old Parkman was going into bankruptcy with the kind of flourish that was reminiscent of the old days before he-men quit drinking strong whiskey and wearing guns on their hips. Behind the times, was he? Oughta quit wearing a gun, had he? Parkman chuckled a third time; he was doing a lot of chuckling this morning, for a man playing a lone hand against as desperate a gang of outlaws as had ever infested the Rockies!

THAT THEY would attempt to rush him shortly was a foregone conclusion. Well, let them. They'd have to come one at a time, and he could shoot them out of their saddles as long as his six chambers held out. He'd already put two of them out of the running, with ten left to account for. He was ready for them again, with all six chambers loaded and waiting. He'd get five or six of them, anyway, if his luck and shooting eye held out; after that—well, it would be a good fight while it lasted. Maybe Bill Hopwood'd be sorry he left town, intrusting his message of refusal to help out an old friend with a tenderfoot of a paying teller who didn't know how to treat a gent when he got the chance.

But the robbers didn't elect to rush him, after all. He discovered their plan of campaign when a bullet suddenly thudded into the carcass of the paint hoss, jarring it and causing the sheltered man to jump. Somebody was firing from the sharp corner of a precipice. There was no escape from them over the steep walls; a fly could hardly have made it. They would try to pot him from the sheltering rocks, trusting to their skill, and perhaps luck, to get him.

They were far enough away to be out of range of his forty-five; but he was not out of range of their Winchesters, by a long shot. The body of the pony did not offer the best shelter in the world, either. A bullet ploughed through the paint's round belly and clipped a hole through Parkman's battered hat; another grazed his shoulder—would have punctured his skull had he not been ducked down at the moment. A third nipped one leathery ear.

It would do no good whatever to sight over the carcass and blaze away with the forty-five, now. Just a waste of shells. Parkman crouched lower, his blue eyes glinting eagerly. Could he hold out long enough to enable the posse—the posse the sheriff surely had organized and headed into the Coyote Canyon road—to come up in the rear and nail the gang?

"Stick with me, little hoss," he muttered to the dead paint. "Hold out jest a little longer, an' we'll show folks a few things yet. Let 'em shoot, dang their hides! Reckon I kin wait as long as they kin."

A recollection of Indian strategy came to him as he lay there, while the light grew stronger and presently the bandits were shooting at him with the aid of broad day-light. At this rate it would only be a question of time until one of the rifle bullets

would get him, paint or no paint. A lead slug jarred the carcass as it struck the backbone and deflected upward, striking the granite wall at one side. With a yell Parkman sprang suddenly to his feet tossed his hands in the air and fell—sprawled in almost the identical position in which he had lain before.

He fell; but when one of the bandits spurred his horse forward, closely followed by a second, a belch of yellow flame came from over the dead paint's back, and the first robber slumped sidewise out of his saddle. The second, with a grunt of surprise, followed suit. A third turned hastily and spurred back to the shelter of the wall. Parkman chuckled as he reloaded.

"That's four of 'em," he exclaimed aloud. "Only eight left, if I ain't mistook."

Something was burning his right shoulder, he discovered, and something wet was trickling down the bare skin under his flannel shirt. Parkman had been wounded before and knew the signs. The bandit's bullets had not left him entirely unscathed, after all. Those fellows could shoot, when you came right down to it. Only a flesh wound—but flesh wounds have been known to slow a man up... Wasn't it about time for that sheriff and his posse to show up?

Even as he wondered his keen ears caught the sound of hoofbeats, far down the gulch beyond where the robber band were hidden by the granite walls. The sheriff was coming! Instinctively the old cattleman braced himself; it was inconceivable that the Thompson gang would not throw further discretion to the winds and try to break past the one-man barrier.

And they did. With a concerted yell calculated to terrorize the lone man who defied them, they came out from behind the bend in the wall, a string of mounted desperadoes, thundering down the narrow defile and shooting wildly as they came. They came in single file, since there was no other way for them to come.

It was simply a matter of waiting until they came within his range, as the old cowman saw it. He had been rushed by Indians in his time, and knew the art of keeping cool. So he lay with his lean body sprawled out behind the carcass, his forty-five resting upon it, his blue eye glinting along the barrel, his calloused finger on the trigger.

The first man left his saddle with a sort of flying leap, and the animal came on, wild-eyed and snorting. The second, toppling over backward, clutched blindly at the air as Parkman's gun belched a second time. The cowman fired a third shot just as the first horse, bounding high, leaped entirely over the barrier in its way and with a thunder of hoofs galloped on up the gulch.

He missed!

The third robber was tearing in, firing as he came. The old cattleman was suddenly conscious of a terrific blow. The bearded face of the robber, dark and terrible, leered down at him as, with a super-human effort, he raised the forty-five for another shot.

He pulled the trigger; the glow of day-light above was shut out by the horse's body as it passed overhead. He was vaguely aware that the leering face was plunging downward and that he had been struck another blow, less devastating than the first. Then there was a cessation of the welter of confusion to his senses as they yeilded to some soporific influence, and he was enfolded in a strange peace. It was a peace punctuated with queer popping noises, fading farther and farther away as he went to sleep, sighing happily.

Why worry over a matter of a thousand dollars? This was all right—anyway...

WHEN HE came to he was in bed. A gruff voice addressed him the instant his seamed old eyes fluttered open.

"Thank the Lord, Frank, you're all right!"

From the looks of things generally—the white sheets that encased his lean old body, the lace curtains on the windows, and other things—the

cowman gathered that he was in the banker's house. He stared up at the anxious face of his old-time partner. His breast felt very sore indeed.

"They got you through the chest, but didn't hit anything vital," the banker hastened to say, answering the query in the other's eyes. "We found you lying behind your horse, shot in two places. Six dead robbers, Frank, and another shot up pretty bad. You're some man, Frank."

"Am I?" Parkman felt curiously unexcited about it. Something was troubling him, however. He had no business to feel so thoroughly at peace with the world.

"Saved the money, too," the banker was saying. "Almost forty thousand, Frank. You'll get a fat reward..."

Ah—that was it! Parkman stirred, and a twinge of pain shot through him.

"Listen here," he said sternly. "I don't want no—reward. Not a cent." It wasn't so easy to talk, but he stuck with it. Some things have to be said. "I s'pose yuh thought I chased that Thompson outfit—for money, didn't yuh?....Well, I didn't. I wouldn't take it if you was the last on earth, Bill. Not after yuh left word with that maverick of a payin' teller that yuh wouldn't lend me a thousand dollars, Bill....I aimed tuh let yore bank git robbed; that's what I—aimed tuh do."

"Well," the banker demanded in a queer voice, "why didn't you, then?"

"'Cause—I was a cussed fool; I reckon that's th' only excuse I got," groaned Parkman disgustedly. "Couldn't forget th' old days, I reckon—even if some other folks could."

It was out, and he felt better. Bill Hopwood couldn't tell *him* he was behind the times any more. Six-shooters had some use yet, by gravy. He'd lost the herd, and the boys would have to wait for their pay a while yet. He'd made it plain he wouldn't touch a cent of Bill Hopwood's money, hadn't he? If that wasn't heaping coals of fire on that old rawhide's head, he didn't know what was.

He wanted to sleep. But somebody was speaking into his ear. It was Bill Hopwood's voice, and it was husky.

"Why, you doggoned ol' sunfisher," the voice was saying, "I sent you that money, Wednesday mornin', out to yore ranch. My pers'nal check. Didn't you get it?"

"I—ain't been out to th' ranch," the wounded man admitted sheepishly. "Got so plumb mad at that payin' teller o' your'n I didn't have good sense, I reckon...Didn't like that maverick. Bill. Don't see—"

"Don't worry 'bout him," interrupted Hopwood. "I found out he was juggling the books. I fired him."

"Huh!" grunted Old Frank Parkman. "That's more like it."

And then he went to sleep in earnest this time.

THE END

GALLOWS POKER

"I caught the gent cheatin', an' called his hand."

by Art Kercheval

Old Seth and his wife wanted to believe the Jimtown Kid's story, but they had to be sure. And there was one simple way of finding out. . .

TALL, AGING Seth Dean, standing at the kitchen window and sucking on his pipe tensely, kept his eyes on the oncoming figure. "It's him, Martha!" Seth said to his wife. "It's the Jimtown Kid!"

Martha was beside him now, looking. "Sure enough, it is."

The Kid was hurt, Seth saw through bugging eyes as he hurried outside and caught up the younger man by the shoulders before he collasped in the yard.

"Martha," Seth called, a twisting tightness suddenly inside him. "Help me get him to the house."

"No, not here," the Kid objected, weary. "The old cave, Dean. The posse—maybe they ain't smelled out my tracks yet—but—"

"We wouldn't make the cave, shape you're in," Seth shook his head, decisively, while old doubts about the Kid clashed with old certainties. "It's gotta be the house, Kid. 'Sides, no posse from Dixon could get up this far till some time tomorow, less'n it was already out on the hunt."

"Don't call me Kid. Only my enemies call me Kid; you're my friend."

Did the Kid really mean the words ...or was he just pretending to be friendly so that he could lean on Seth Dean for help? These thoughts raced through Seth Dean. With Martha's help he got young Perry

Rawlins—for that was his real name—inside the aging farmhouse. Perry was aided into a big rickety chair. He had lost his guns somewhere in the shuffle, Seth noted, as well as the big bay it was said he always rode. Martha heated water and went to work on the Kid's head wound. When she was through, Seth rolled a cigarette, stuck it in the young man's lips and lighted it for him.

"Ain't as bad as it looked at first Perry," Seth observed, with a graveness. "Kinda grazed you above the ear, was all. But it sure was a close call."

The Kid grinned flatly, blowing a smoke ring ceilingward. "You're wonderin' how I got it, huh?"

There it was again, some hint of a false air about the Kid. Or was it merely Seth's imagination?

"When a badge-totin' bounty hunter rides you down and near shoots your head off," the Kid said, eyes suddenly narrowing, "you just got one thought—to crack a cap back at him and keep on livin'. You shoot to kill, like I just did Alf Smart your deptuy sheriff in Arroyo Blanco." Bitterness made his voice thin. "Maybe tonight or tomorrow they'll find the body on the trail and they'll know the Jimtown Kid has come back."

Seth winced then and remembered the few occasions he'd seen Alf Smart, who had a pretty young wife and a little boy who'd be ready to start school next fall. Alf's wages hadn't provided them more than a pinched existence and the standing reward money on the Kid's head would have been a boon. If that was the straight of it, you couldn't blame the Kid, either, for looking after his own skin.

Seth met Martha's eyes now, across the room, and saw the puzzlement in them. But in a moment she had shrugged off whatever bothered her, tossing back a strand of whitening hair. She carried the pan of water back to the kitchen and Seth could hear sounds of her poking up the fire. He was wondering, oddly, if she would beat the socks off him tonight when they matched as usual their card-playing wits.

"Five years ago you left us, Perry, after bein' with us nigh a year." Seth strode to the window and looked a little achingly out at the sun just slipping behind his peach orchard. "It kind of hurt Martha. And I'd set some store by you."

He turned and the Kid looked up at him and there was something in his expression beyond the ken. Cigarette ash fell on the floor; Perry Rawlins ignored it, saying tightly. "You and Martha was real folks to me. Real folks."

Was it cunning in the Kid's eyes, cunning he would employ until he no longer had use for the Deans? Or was it a momentary kindling of warmth in him? Seth shook his head, hoping in some way to find the key to the real Perry Rawlins.

IT WAS SIX years now since Martha and he had first seen Perry. Perry's dad, a roving well-digger, had been killed by lightning in the terrific electric storm that night, which had left the sixteen-year-old to shift for himself. Seth and Martha had found the lad and coaxed him to come home with them. They'd brought him to the house and thrust mountains of food at him. Nothing much was said about it, but the Deans, who were childless, hoped that Perry would want to stay with them.

But all along, it had been a strange relationship; Seth saw that more clearly now. Perry at once developed a restlessness. Seth and Martha did their best to provide the youngster a good home life, hoping he would take to the farm work and especially the orchard tasks, but Perry's world seemed beyond these narrow boundaries. There was no holding him, finally, and nearby Dixon town held fascination. Seth didn't like it when word came of the boy's trips to McClellan's Gambling Emporium, where Ace McCellan took him under wing and taught him tricks with a deck of cards. Broaching Perry about it, Seth was taken aback, however, by Perry's flaring answer. "None of your business, Seth Dean. Go soak your head in a rain barrel."

That part of it wouldn't have been

so bad, Seth reasoned now, if Perry hadn't held back some of the peach money. Entrusted with the wagon-load of Albertas, he sold the lot for a good price in Dixon, but held out a few dollars for himself when he handed the money to Seth. Later, when Seth found out about it, Perry beat him to the punch by returning the amount and saying, "I forgot I had it in my other pocket. At first I was goin' to say nothin' about it. But I—I couldn't be dishonest with you and Martha." Had Perry, sensing he was caught red-handed, used this way out? Or had he come clean of his own free will? Seth wondered about that for five half-empty years.

"Yep," the Kid was saying, "I reckon I done wrong leavin' you and Martha. But I got the travel itch and wanted to see some places to the south. Right off, I found myself slammed into trouble."

Seth nodded. "I've heard the story, different ways."

"But this is the truth, Seth! It was self-defense the first time I took to a gun, but I couldn't prove it. I caught the gent cheatin' at cards and called his hand. I happened to be some faster on the draw, and that's why I'm still breathin'. Folks in Saddle Rock, howsomever, called it murder; the dead hombre, you see, had plenty friends.

"From that first shootin' on, I had me a rep and they put a price on my noggin." The Kid twisted the fire out of his ciagrette stub. "Seth, it was a case of kill or be killed. The tinhorn's pals tried to take me, two against one, but I managed to blaze my way out of it and fork a fast cayuse out of Saddle Rock for keeps. I was forced to do some bad things after that, but I got the blame for a lot of jobs, too, that I didn't do." He reached for the deck of cards lying on the table beside the chair, couldn't quite make it and sank back.

Seth got it for him; also got the ironing board and placed it across the arms of Perry's chair. "Martha and me believe it all happened the way you tell it. Wanted to believe you got a heap of good in you, Perry," he said.

Perry laid out the cards on the board for a game of solitaire, nodding a little sadly, it seemed. "Some place, Seth," he said, "I might stand a chance. I've been thinkin' about Oregon or Idaho. Some place, maybe, where I won't be recognized, and I can start clean with a brand-new name. It might be a pipe dream, but I keep hopin'."

Seth straddled a chair, then, and let his thoughts run for a while. "Maybe it ain't too late, Perry. If you could go somewhere and make good, the Law might forget those old things that happened. Me and Martha'll miss you, but someday you might be free to come back here. You'd have a real home here, and you could give me a hand with the peach-raisin' Uh, you shoulda played your black ten."

Martha came in, bringing soup. She was smiling. "Tide you till supper," she said.

"Do I remember *that!*" the Kid breathed, half rising and sniffing. Sincerity? Sham? Seth's thoughts clashed again. "You made the best grub, bar none Martha, I've ever tasted."

Martha set the soup on the board. Perry Rawlins fell to, and Seth settled back and filled his pipe and watched him.

Many times during the past five lonely years, he recalled, Martha and he had tried to savvy the howcome and whyfor of the Jimtown Kid. What had always been in the makeup of lean, wild-eyed Perry Rawlins? Just how wild or how bad was the Kid? Seth wanted the key to that; he wanted to believe that there was much that was good in Perry Rawlins. There had always been an emptiness in the life of the Deans, because Martha couldn't have children. If Perry got the right breaks in the future, he might yet satisfy their longings for someone to care for.

Perry finished the soup with exaggerated gusto and Martha took the bowl. He leaned back, rolled a smoke, lighted it and took a few drags, picked up the deck of cards and idly shuffled it. Presently he was laying them out again for another game of solitaire. Seth's pipe went out and he

lighted it and passively studied the Kid's moves. Martha was mixing something in a bowl in the kitchen. They'd have supper soon.

SETH WAS thinking about the cave in the nearby Lonesome Mountains where he could hide the Jimtown Kid. Perry and he had found it on their first hunting trip, below a sandstone ledge, a big dark hole in the side of the hill that was almost hidden behind two huge boulders. When it was dark, he could move him up there, fix him up comfortably with blankets. From time to time he could bring him food. No posse would ever find him there. Perry could hide out until it was safe to leave the country.

He leaned forward and he said to the Kid, "Your red six." And the Kid looked a little foolish for a moment and corrected the error. "Gettin' rusty, I reckon," he grinned.

Somewhere in the back of Seth Dean's brain an idea began to crawl. The key, maybe, to this damnable puzzle that was the Jimtown Kid. Martha brought in the supper and Perry gulped his like a famished lobo. Seth caught Martha's gaze straying often to the Kid as she ate more slowly than usual. He knew there was sadness and wonder in her, too. The mothering right, forever denied her, had caused her to become attached to a dream about this strange young wanderer—a dream that might never come true.

After the supper dishes were cleared off the table, it was Seth, still seated, who began to riffle the cards. "Solitaire ain't a sociable game, Perry," he said mildly. "Me and Martha, now, still likes our nightly game of draw poker." He chuckled at a recollection. "She trimmed the shirt offa me, couple nights ago. Now I gotta buy her that little blue hat I seen in the store window down to Dixon."

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"Go on with you," Martha laughed, seating herself again.

The Kid was looking at the cards with obvious new interest. "If you'd care to make it three-handed—" He glanced, then, toward the window.

"Guess you're right. Posse couldn't make it tonight."

"I was hopin' you'd come in," Seth said. "The more the merrier." His pipe went out again and this time he didn't light it.

He got the game going. Two-bit limit. He took in the first pot. Martha gathered in the second one, promising herself a new dress out of Seth before the night was over. When Seth pulled in the third, Perry grinned twistedly.

"Maybe this ain't my lucky day," he said.

The game went on something like that for an hour, with the Kid making occasional wins, but Seth and Martha raking in most of the chips. Seth was standing pat now on a full house, and the Kid was making a discard and pitching himself two new ones.

It was Perry Rawlins' moment of triumph and he showed it in his tight grin. He laid out four aces and started to rake in the pot. But he never completed the reach.

With the lightning in his bones, despite his gray hairs, Seth sprang away from the table, grabbed up his .30-30 rifle from its wall pegs and leveled it at Perry.

"That'll be about all, Jimtown Kid," he said, ignoring Martha's gasp of astonishment. "I reckon I've got it all figured out now—"

The Kid, who hadn't been prepared for such a surprise move, sat frozen in the chair. "Seth...you gone loco?"

"Got the key at last," Seth said, grimly. "Wasn't sure, all these years. But you've just made it plain for me."

"Wh-what you mean?" the Kid stammered, alarm showing in his lean face. Unarmed and helpless, he still hadn't moved. Seth's finger was too taut on the trigger.

"Martha and me'll kinda have to go on bein' a little lonesome," Seth went on. "But at least we won't have a polecat for a son. We'll live, with a lot of good things around us and we'll be thankful. For a while, I was just ready to give you your chance to outsmart that posse and go straight. Now, while you're in the calaboose down to Dixon, you'll have plenty of time to think about it—about how it was only a game with a two-bit limit, but it had a hangnoose in the pot!"

"You've got sharp eyes," the Kid said at last, hopelessly, his shoulders slumping. "I didn't realize it was a trap."

"I had me a right smart hunch about it all," Seth admitted a little dismally, "when you cheated yourself at solitaire the second time. A gent low enough to do that, I figured might even cheat his only friends in a penny-ante game of poker. When you palmed that ace off the bottom, I was sure of you for all time, Kid. And I can see by the look in Martha's eyes that she's goin' to be a witness alongside me in court, testifyin' that you admitted killin' Alf Smart, however it happened. You're goin' to hang high, tinhorn. Martha, saddle up Thunderbolt and ride for the sheriff."

Sally Evan found the remains of Snakefinger Sam's latest.

Taming of Snakefinger Sam

by Frank E. Smith

When Sheriff Ben and me go out to pick up Snakefinger Sam, I figure that my career is about to end, sudden-like . . .

I HAD MY boots propped on the spur-scarred desk in the Sheriff's Office, wishin' I was back tendin' bar at the *Hi-Lo-Jack* instead of totin' a deputy's star, when Sheriff Ben Roper came stompin' in. The look on his red, blunt-jawed face meant trouble for somebody.

"Get off your gristle, Charlie," he said. "Check your iron and load your belt. We're goin' to bring him in."

"Meanin' who?" I asked, knowin' durned well who, and not likin' the idea even a little bit.

"Snakefinger Sam," Ben said. "I reckon you heard he killed another man last night, down in Yellow Horse?"

"I heard."

His green eyes narrowed a bit. "Well, it's his last," he said tightly. "He should have kept his hired gun out of my county." He scooped up extra shells from a desk drawer and shoved them in the pocket of his levis. "Let's get movin', Charlie."

I put on my J.B. and took a look around the little office, thinkin' it

might be the last time I'd see it.

As I followed Ben across the boardwalk to the tie-rail, I said, "Where you figure to find him?"

He didn't answer me until we was half-way out of town. Then he said, "I was cuttin' trail the other day, lookin' for a bunch of rustlers. About twenty miles the other side of Yellow Horse I come across a tarpaper shack, sittin' back in an unlikely bunch of rocks. I took a look-see. I didn't find no rustlers, Charlie, but I did find a tatoo needle and a bottle of ink."

'Knowin' that," I said, "you could have picked him up before this."

"Didn't have no call to," Ben said. "Long as he kept his gun quiet. Sal'y Evan found the remains of his lat'st."

I'e set a fast pace toward Yellow Ho se. The further we rode, the less anxious I was to get there. The sweat along my backside was gettin' plum chilly...

I'd never seen Snakefinger Sam, but, like everybody else, I'd heard all about him. He was a big, handsome, yellow-haired gent, about thirty. He'd earned his handle because of his snake-fast gun draw, and he had a reputation as one of the worst gunslingers in the West. He was so proud of that name of his that he had a carnival man tatoo a rattlesnake on his trigger finger, with its heads just above the fingernail and its body twisting around the finger up to the second knuckle. The rattles started there, and that was the hellish part of the tatoo—because every rattle on that snake's tail stood for a man Snakefinger Sam had sent to boothill. He'd got himself a tatoo needle so he could add the rattles, one by one, and men said there was a string of them halfway up the back of his hand.

THE BLAZING sun was straight up when Ben and me bellied through the brush toward the hideout shack, havin' left our horses ground-hitched about forty rods back. We crawled around a big boulder, and there he was, pickin' up wood from a choppin' block beside the door.

Ben stood up, got a bead on him and yelled, "Get your hands in the air. Sam! We got the drop on you!"

For about ten seconds Snakefinger didn't make a move. Then he straightened up slow and turned to face us, the sun glaring on his yellow hair. "Howdy, Ben," he said, lifting his hands shoulder-high.

Sam and me walked down the slope toward him, me doin' my damndest to figure how come these two hombres know each other.

When we got close, Ben kept him covered while I lifted his iron. Ben jerked his head toward the shack and Snakefinger went inside, making it slow.

There was a broken-down stove in the middle of the room, and against one wall there was a bunk with a lot of gunnysacks piled on it for beddin'. Between the stove and the bunk there was a rickety table and a chair with the back missin'. One corner of the room was piled up with yellowed newspapers and empty tomater cans.

"I reckon you know the play," Sam said.

Snakefinger pulled the chair out from the table, sat down on it and stared at Ben. "Why does it have to be you, Ben?"

Ben said, "It had to happen sooner or later; you've killed your last man."

I thought, *something's wrong here. Here's a lawman and a wanted killer, talkin' just as sociable as a couple of men makin' cow-talk.*

Snakefinger's voice went soft. "You and me was pards once. We was in more than one tight together."

"That was a lot of years ago," Ben said. "You wasn't a killer, then."

Snakefinger spread his hands and ran his tongue across his lips. I noticed the tatoo then and something started crawling inside my stomach.

"If things was the other way 'round," Snakefinger said, "I'm damned if I'd lead *you* to a cottonwood."

"You'll get a trial," Ben said.

Snakefinger's laugh wasn't a pretty thing to hear. "Trial! Hell, they'll hang me the minute they see me!"

"I'm a sheriff," Ben said. "I been

doin' my job for fifteen years; this is part of it."

A pulse began to throb at one corner of Snakefinger's mouth. "I'm needin' a drink, Ben. There's a jug of forty-rod under the bunk yonder."

"Get it, Charlie," Ben said.

WE HAD A drink around, and then another. Snakefinger wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and when his trigger finger moved, the snake on it twisted just like it was alive. "Ben," he said, "you remember the night we split up? I saved your life that night, Ben. You called that tinhorn on a double-deal and he went for his derringer under the table. I was standin' at the bar and I winged him about a half-second before he would have gut-shot you. You remember, Ben...?"

Ben took another drink, a big one. "I remember," he said quietly. "I ain't likin' this, Sam, but I don't have no choice. It ain't somethin' between you and me—it's somethin' between a lawman and an outlaw." His boots scraped on the hard plank floor. "Let's go, Sam."

Sweat beaded out on Snakefinger's forehead and his shoulders slumped. The color washed from his lips. "I ain't goin'."

Ben set the jug down on the floor easy, keepin' his eyes on Snakefinger. "One way or the other, Sam..."

Snakefinger's voice was almost a whisper. "You'll take me dead, then."

It was mighty quiet in that little shack, so quiet I could hear the horse flies buzzing around outside. Snakefinger's chair creaked a little under his weight, but there was no other sound.

After what seemed a week Ben said, "Get that axe off the woodpile, Charlie." I figured Ben'd had too much of the forty-rod, but I did as he said.

Snakefinger looked at the axe and then at Ben. Sweat streamed down his taut-skinned face; his fancy-dan red shirt was black with it.

Ben crossed to Snakefinger and stood there a moment, testin' the edge of the axe with his thumb and lookin' straight into the killer's eyes. "Lay your trigger finger on the edge of the table, Sam," he said.

Snakefinger's eyes got wide and his jaw sagged, like he can't believe his ears. I got a good holt on the carbine, expectin' him to bolt.

But he just set there, making little sounds in his throat, just like he was paralyzed.

Ben lifted Snakefinger's hand to the edge of the table. "I can't kill you, Sam," he said, almost gentle. "But I got to stop you."

He was quick with the axe. I kept my eyes on Snakefinger's face. He didn't even flinch. It was over before he could force his brain to believe what was happening. His eyes crawled down to the stub where his finger had been. His lips moved without sayin' anything.

BEN GOT THE forty-rod and poured it over the wound and scraped up some sut from the stove for a poultice to stop the blood. After that he bandaged the hand with Snakefinger's neckerchief. Hell was beginning to burn in Snakefinger's eyes, but he still didn't open his mouth.

We took him out of the shack and helped him on his horse, which he'd hid in a bunch of scrub brush. Ben handed the reins up to him. He said, "I reckon you can find a sawbones to do a better job, Sam." Then he slipped a roll of bills in Snakefinger's boot and slapped the horse on the rump.

We watched him disappear over a ridge, never lookin' back. Ben stepped in the shack and got the tatooed finger. He wrapped it in his neckerchief and stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

He said softly, "Sam'll never be able to throw down on another man, Charlie. I reckon I've done my duty by my badge." He brought his thumb up and touched the bulge in his shirt pocket. "This'll satisfy folks that they don't have to worry about Snakefinger Sam no more. Later, we can bury it in boothill." His voice was very tired. "Maybe some day Sam'll understand that this was the only way I could keep from buryin' the rest of him there."

Betsy Hergesheimer - Wagon Boss

by Rex Whitechurch

BORN IN Scranton, Pennsylvania, of sturdy Dutch stock, Betty Orka Hergesheimer was taken west at the age of sixteen by her father and distinguished herself in the next five years by guiding thirty wagon trains and bossing the outfits across the plains of Kansas. She shot two renegades and the old newspaper files give her credit for killing an unnamed number of Indians. In one rifle duel with a roving Sioux warrior she was shot four times, once through the left breast, downed her opponent and lay in a raging fever for twenty one days, to emerge unafraid and ready to take on all comers.

Betsy was tall, and unusually broad-shouldered for a woman. She wore spectacles, had auburn hair and, although there were moments when her natural refinement of character peeped through the rugged exterior of her, she was for the most part as rough and coarse as the toughest men of her outfit. She would have been pretty without her spectacles, but had to wear them, due to an eye ailment which often prevented her from scoring a bull's eye with the long rifle. This, along with a Bowie knife which she could throw with amazing accuracy, composed her arsenal. She never fired a revolver in her life, declined to try, being adept in the handling of the big heavy gun she had brought along from Scranton. She wore buckskin, and it is said that until her death, at the age of twenty-seven, she never wore a dress.

Outfitting wagon trains at Saint Joe, Betsy was much sought after by emigrants and always received a goodly sum for her services. Her father had settled at Saint Joe and was a wagon maker and merchant.

When she wasn't guiding trains she was working in her father's store. "I don't tolerate drinking in the outfits I take over," she would always say. "You can gamble your fool heads off, but drink—no, not as long as I'm in charge. Whiskey is for snakebites and fever and I see it only as a medicine. So if you want me, let's go."

She rode a roan horse called William Penn, a fast endurable steed. The horse understood her every command. She would frequently ride ahead three or four hundred yards, and when camp was made she would do her share of guard duty. She liked to be alone, and when night came took to her solitary quarters, lying in the wagon on a pile of furs and listening and reading poetry by lamplight. Two attempts were made to attack her by members of the trains she was bossing. One man named Dreyfus coveted her and when she repulsed his advances, he stole into her wagon at night and a desperate fight took place on the floor. It was dark in the wagon, but Betsy secured her Bowie knife and, as Dreyfus overpowered her and she lay on the floor, she managed to strike him with the knife. The blade was buried to the hilt in his back. The only comment she made was: "Whew, that was a close call!" A calico shirt she wore had been torn to ribbons.

In the second instance of the kind Bill Henry followed her out away from the train and accosted her; she ordered him back to camp. He kept coming at her and she kept circling around, seeking to avoid his hands. When he lunged she used the knife sticking it into Henry's throat and almost cutting the Adam's Apple out by the roots. She was never again molested. "In some respects," she said, "it is gratifying to think I appealed to them as a woman."

Betsy's one love affair lasted her entire lifetime, but she never got her man. Sergeant Rufus Wilhpoit of Fort Kearney, was the apple of her eye, but the sergeant Rufus Wilhoit of Fort Kearney, esting and wrote Betsy that he could never come back to her. Betsy had the soiled and tear-stained letter in her shirt pocket when a bullet entered her heart in an attack on her wagon train near Fort Kearney, and it is said that Wilhoit, who guided his soldiers there too late buried her with his own hands.

Butch and Craig fired simultaneously.

The No-Romance Cowhand

by Zachary Strong

(author of "Badlands Bride")

Rita Robinson wanted it understood that Craig Cranby could have a foreman's job, so long as he did not fall in love with her. But she wasn't prepared for Cranby's additional proposal that this should go double.

THE DRUMMING of galloping hoofs caused Craig Canby to glance up quickly. He uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he dropped the sandwich he had been eating, then sprang into the saddle on the horse that was grazing nearby. He caught up the reins as the rangy gelding answered the touch of a spur.

Galloping madly across the mesa was a coal black stallion. Craig had already noticed that one bridle rein was broken off at the bit; the other, which was also broken in half, whipped around the stallion's knees.

Clinging to the saddle horn with both hands was a rider, who, at first sight, Craig had thought was a boy. The rider's face was white, strained.

As the gelding raced to head off the stallion, Craig saw his mistake; the rider was a girl.

The broken bridle reins told their own story. And now the stallion had the bit between its teeth and was speeding blindly across the mesa.

That, alone, would have been nothing to worry about. With plenty of open country before it, the thing for the rider to have done would have been just to hang on and let the stud wind itself.

But the mesa was not open and flat, and Craig knew it. Half a mile ahead lay Cut Canyon, a narrow, deep gash which slashed the mesa in two, but too wide for a horse to leap.

That the rider realized her danger was apparent from the look of terror in her eyes. Why she didn't drop from the saddle was something Craig could not understand. The distance still separating them was too great for him to yell to her. So there was only one thing left for him to do—ride like the wind to head off the oncoming stallion.

The question was, would he do it in time? The space, between the flying stallion and the deep canyon was being cut down rapidly, but the stallion was still going strong. Craig leaned forward in the saddle and jabbed in a spur.

The gelding's belly sank closer to the ground as it responded with an added burst of speed. The mesa echoed to the pounding of hoofs. The girl seemed unaware of Craig's presence as she clung tenaciously to the horn.

"Slide outa the saddle!" Craig yelled at her.

Then the girl turned a terrified face to him as he came quartering upon the black stud. But the infuriated animal had already seen him, and let out a notch of speed that threatened to carry it to the deep canyon in short order.

Again and again Craig shouted to her to drop from the saddle, but she only clung the tighter, either unable to hear or understand, or else too frightened.

Cut Canyon was only a hundred yards away, now. Craig spoke sharply to his gelding as he shook out the noose of his lariat, allowing it to trail out behind as he prepared to throw.

The black stallion thundered past, well beyond throwing range, leaving Craig's horse behind. Spurs raked its steaming flanks, and the gelding dug down into its stamina for a last burst of speed.

Yard by yard, the distance was cut down. Around Craig's head circled the wide noose. Standing up in the stirrups, he judged the distance with a practiced eye and cast.

The noose darted out, widened, then settled. Trained to the minute, Craig's mount dug its forelegs deep into the earth, coming to a sudden stop even as the rider groaned in dismay.

Instead of settling over the stallion's neck, the noose had missed its mark and had settled over the girl.

The quick throw, the sudden stopping of the gelding, and the realization that he had roped the girl instead of the stud—all had happened so quickly that the damage had been done before Craig had had time to slacken the rope.

The stallion shot from under the girl. For a split instant she seemed to hover in midair, then crashed to the ground, where she lay still, the noose around her shoulders.

Horror gripped Craig's heart. From the girl's position sprawled out on the ground, he felt sure she must be dead, killed.

As he sat there in the saddle, staring at the inert form and cursing himself for a bungling fool, he heard a scream that chilled his hot blood.

He glanced up in time to see the stallion leap high into the air and disappear into Cut Canyon. A second later, he heard a muffled thud; then the silence of the mesa closed in around him.

CRAIG FLUNG himself from the saddle and ran to the girl. He took her in his arms and stared into her unseeing eyes. Twin rivulets of blood trickled from her nostrils.

He glanced from the girl to the

horizon, helplessly. He had never been in a spot like that before, and it looked like he was going to be in it for some time yet, so far as the arrival of any help was concerned.

The fear that had gripped him became greater as he glanced again at the girl's blue lips. Even as he wondered if she were alive or dead, he unconsciously admired her beauty, her slenderness.

At last she stirred, moaned, and a heavy lead seemed to have been lifted from Craig's shoulders. Consciousness returned slowly, and finally she looked questioningly up into Craig's handsome face.

"Oh!" she cried weakly. She sat up and held her head between her hands. "I remember you, now," she faltered. "You—you roped me. Where's General?"

Craig took it for granted she was referring to the black stallion. He jerked a thumb toward the canyon.

"Guess you better hadn't take a look, miss. Now just how bad are you hurt?"

He helped her to her feet. She took a few tentative steps, then stopped and patted her body gingerly, ending up at the back of her head.

"Bruises and a big bump," she announced; "that and a good shaking up. I guess I'm lucky."

Craig dusted off her chaps and skirt with his sombrero, picked hers up and handed it to her. She swayed a little, so he put an arm around her.

"Well, I've learned a lesson," she smiled wanly. "The boys warned me to leave General alone, but I wouldn't listen. They advised me to use all new gear on him, and again I knew better."

"You mean—" Craig began.

"I used an old bridle. The General left the ranch like a lamb, then suddenly bolted. When I tried to check him, the reins broke. That's the whole story."

"Why didn't you pile outa the saddle when I hollered?"

"Paralyzed with fear, I guess. All I could think of was that canyon ahead." She glanced toward it, and shuddered. "I forgot to thank you for saving me from—from that."

"Since the Open A spread's the closest, I take it you're from there, huh?" Craig asked.

"Yes. I'm Rita Robinson. You seem to know this country."

"Not so well," Craig replied. "I've ridden through it a time or two. Is the Open A in the dude business, now?"

"Hardly. I own it. When it goes into the dude wrangling business, it'll be across my dead body."

Craig grinned at that, and then brought up his horse.

"If you feel O.K. now we'll ride double," he suggested.

The girl was still shaky as the horse started forward, but Craig, who was perched behind her on the saddle skirting, held her steady.

"I guess what you was tryin' to do was to prove to the Open A waddies that you knowed more about hosses than they did," Craig said, smiling. "Well, you know now that studs is treacherous."

"Yes, I'll confess I was—partly," Rita replied. "But I also had business in Bear Paw too. I was going to hire a new foreman."

"In that case," Craig laughed, "yore troubles are over. You've hired one."

"You, a foreman of a ranch? Why, you can't even throw a rope straight!"

"That stud's speed fooled me," Craig confessed. "Quarterin' up on him, it was hard to judge. When he flashed past I had only a second to act in. At that, I only missed him by a foot."

"And caught me. Anyway, thanks. It might have been worse. Now, as to this other matter, what experience have you had?"

"Plenty," Craig replied. "I was raised on a ranch. Two years ago I—well, I sorta got tired of it and decided to—er—drift for a while. Am I hired or am I not?"

THE RANCH buildings of the Open A loomed up on the horizon. For a long time Rita Robinson just stared ahead in silence.

"There's a condition to that," she finally observed in a voice that, to Craig, sounded hard, severe. "I'm discharging my present foreman be-

cause—because— Well, I'll put it bluntly. Since father's death, I've hired a number of foremen, and each insisted he was not only going to be foreman but owner, also. In other words, they made love to me. The Open A, of course, was what they were in love with."

"I savvy," Craig nodded. "So what?"

"So I got heartily sick of it," Rita replied. "Now I'm doing what I should have done in the first place —laying down the law beforehand. Yes, I'll hire you—on trial. And the first time you attempt to make love to me, out you go. Is that clear?"

Craig grinned broadly, but because he was behind Rita, she failed to see it.

"Clear as a creek," he said "As a matter of fact, miss, you're quite safe, as far as I'm concerned. You couldn't hire me to make love to you. Fact is, you ain't my type. I like 'em big and round and gentle—and blonde. You're small, thin, red-headed, fiery, and you know it all."

"Indeed!" Rita exclaimed, taken completely aback. To be analyzed in a cold-blooded manner was a distinct shock. However, she suddenly remembered she had just laid down certain conditions, which the man behind her was evidently going to respect. "That is," she added hastily in order to hide her confusion, "I'm glad to know I won't be pestered. I mean, I'm glad we—er—understand each other so thoroughly."

Then Craig said with a slow grin: "I want the understandin' to cut ice both ways."

"I don't quite get that," Rita said, puzzled.

"Not havin' a pencil to write it down with, I'll explain," Craig offered. He tried to make his voice sound haughty, although he found it difficult to keep a straight face. "You'll keep yore distance too, miss. It takes two to make love, savvy?"

"Why—why—you—you—" Rita began, and caught herself just in time. She had insisted on a bargain, and now it looked like she was getting the worst end of it.

"My mirror tells me," Craig went on, ignoring the girl's outburst, "that I ain't exactly a bull-faced, slab-sided hombre. And a few women have fell for me, believe it or not. So I'm just warnin' you, ma'am—miss, I mean. I don't like women to throw themselves at me any more than you like men makin' love to you. However, what we can't help, why, we can't help. It wasn't our fault we was born handsome, was it?"

"I think you're impertinent!" Rita flared. "Do you mean to try to tell me that *I* made love to—"

"No, I'm just clinchin' a bargain," Craig cut in, smothering a chuckle. "I'm not trying to tell *you* anything. You're the boss, and you're tellin' *me*. Am I hired?"

"No—yes. That is, possibly," Rita stammered, torn between a desire to reject him because of his frankness, and a desire not to appear ridiculous in his eyes by doing so. "I don't know."

"Make up yore mind," Craig urged, "'cause we're purty nigh to the Open A, and them waddies of yours is runnin' to find out what's happened. They seem mighty anxious about you. Or are they all in love with you, like the foreman?"

"To which foreman do you refer?" Rita demanded.

"Why—er—to the one you're gonna fire," Craig answered with twinkling eyes.

"Oh!" Rita observed. "Well, then in that case, you're hired."

The Open A waddies crowded their horses close to Craig's, and showered the girl with questions.

"One of you boys ride over to Cut Canyon," Rita ordered, after she had explained why she had returned without the stallion, "and make sure General is dead and not suffering. I'm all right, myself."

CRAIG FELT her body suddenly tense as the horse stopped in front of the veranda. A tall, well-built rider had just turned the corner of the ranch house. He walked with the swing and air of one who felt pretty sure of himself.

"Well, well! What's all this, Rita?" he sang out, his tone distinctly one of possession. "Where's General?" When the girl explained,

the man laughed. "I told you you couldn't conquer that demon, didn't I?" he said. "After this, mebbe you'll listen to me."

The girl started to dismount, but the big man took her in his arms and lifted her from the saddle. Craig noticed that he held her longer than was necessary.

Rita jerked away from him, a look of annoyance on her pretty face. She glanced up to Craig, who had remained seated on the saddle skirting.

"Why, I've actually forgotten to ask your name!" she cried.

Craig informed her, and she introduced him to the other man.

"This is Butch Baylor, my foreman."

Craig had to admire the girl's pluck. He realized she was faced with an unpleasant duty, and the set of her jaw muscles convinced him that she was going to do it gravely. The foreman, evidently, was unaware of the fact that he was to be discharged.

"Craig," Rita said, "take care of your horse, and make yourself at home in the bunkhouse. Butch, step into the house with me, please. I've something to say to you."

Craig watered his horse in the corral, and was about to unsaddle it when a thought struck him. Just how would Butch Baylor take his discharge? Rita had put herself in a ticklish spot. Evidently, Craig reasoned, she had not expected to hire another foreman quite so soon, and she had left Butch still in charge of the ranch. Thus, because of the black stallion's wild ride, she had actually hired one foreman without first discharging the other.

"There was a look in that hombre's eyes I don't like," Craig muttered, as he hurried back to the house. "And he talked like he owned her. Mebbe he ain't gonna like bein' fired.

Glancing around, he noticed no riders in sight, so he increased his stride until he reached the foot of the veranda steps. The door of the house stood open, and he could hear voices inside the front room, Butch's and the girl's.

Craig hated the thought of being caught eavesdropping, but at the same time he feared for the girl. So he tiptoed up the steps, thinking up an excuse for his presence, should he be seen, and stood at one side of the door. Butch was speaking.

"All right, Rita, if that's the way you feel about it. But I didn't savvy I was doing anything wrong, and I don't yet. It ain't no crime to make love to a purty gal. And what guarantee have you got that this new jasper won't make love to you?"

His voice was low, quiet, and hardly what Craig had expected to hear from a man of his build and confident bearing.

"We'll not discuss that now," was Rita's reply.

Relieved, Craig tiptoed down the steps and hurried back to his horse. Later, when he entered the bunkhouse, Butch was busy rolling up his bedding.

"Well, so long," he said, shouldering the roll. "Hope you make out all right with the little spitfire. You will, if you watch yore step—and don't make love to her."

He laughed harshly as he went out, and Craig stood undecided as to just how to take that. Then he grinned, shrugged his shoulders, and made up his bed in a bunk.

"He took it like a lamb," Craig mused. "Still, I'd have bet my shirt he'd have raised a fuss."

THE FOLLOWING morning Rita met the riders as they left the cook house, and gave each his task for the day.

"I'm doing this," she explained to Craig, "because you're not yet familiar with the ranch. Saddle my horse, and we'll take a ride over it. After that, it'll be up to you."

As they rode toward the mountains Rita was singularly silent, confining her brief remarks to the condition of the cattle as they met up with them.

At noon they sat in the shade of the cottonwoods on Cougar Creek, which commanded a view of the country below them, and shared a lunch the girl had brought with her.

"Tomorrow," she told Craig, "you and your riders will comb the foot-

hills and mountain slope for fat stock. I want to ship at least a trainload of steers. I'll keep track of the work and have the cars spotted on the siding by the time you've trailed the herd to Bear Paw. I might even take a hand in the roundup, just for exercise."

"And to keep an eye on me," Craig thought to himself, "and see if I know my stuff." Aloud he said: "I get you."

"And please get this, also," Rita said with stunning suddenness: "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, thank you. I saw you yesterday, standing just outside the door, listening. When I need a bodyguard, I'll hire one."

It was on the tip of Craig's tongue to exclaim, "Phew!" but he checked himself in time. "I get that too," he said instead. "Sorry." He glanced at her, but she was looking the other way. "I was afraid that Butch might—"

"Showing concern for me already, eh?" Rita cut in meaningly. "You're treading on dangerous ground. Butch was fired because he couldn't mind his own business, remember."

"So that's it, huh?" Craig said. "If a feller lifts his hat to you, he's tryin' to get fresh. All right, then, get a load of this. You hired me to boss the Open A, and that's what I intend to do. If you wanna take a hand in the roundup, that's all right by me. But keep out from under my feet, 'cause if you don't—well, you'll hear plenty, and it won't be no words of love."

They rode back to the Open A in silence. Craig occasionally stole a glance at the girl, and was caught in the act several times. They parted at the veranda without a word.

"Hey, listen. you rannies," Craig said to the riders in the bunkhouse that night, "the little lady in the big house figgers to sorta horn in on the roundup tomorrow. I'd just as soon she stayed at home with her knittin'. However, since she's determined to go, remember this: *I'm* the boss, savvy? You'll take yore orders from me."

Craig was surprised next morning, however, when the roundup outfit pulled away from the Open A without Rita. But later on in the day she put in an appearance, watching from a distance.

The next day she helped the men with the cut-back herd. She kept away from Craig, but he could feel her eyes on him, sizing up his ranch knowledge and the way in which he handled his men.

One night, when he rode out to the herd of fat stock, to check up on the night hawks, he even found her there.

"She's shore all business," Craig had to admit to himself. "Too bad she figgers every feller she meets is in love with her. But she'll get bravely over that afore my times up here."

After making sure the night hawks were awake and watching the herd, Craig rode alongside Rita's horse, and both started back to the ranch.

"How'm I doin'?" he inquired.

"Oh, you'll do—for the time being," Rita replied. "The others did all right—at first."

"Until they started makin' love to you, I suppose," Craig grinned. "I get it."

"I'm glad you haven't forgotten—Craig."

"Not a chance—Rita. And I hope you haven't forgotten what I said."

Rita's brow puckered. "I'm afraid I have," she admitted. "Just what *did* you say, Craig?"

"I said I like mine big and round and gentle. Remember?"

"Oh—you!" Rita cried, and galloped off into the night, followed by her new foreman's rollicking laughter.

"That'll hold the little lady," Craig chuckled, making no effort to follow after her. "And that's an idea, too. Every time she comes near me I'll spring it on her. Fire me for makin' love to *her!* Phooie! No woman livin' can tie a can to my tail."

THE ROUNDUP was drawing to a close. Fewer and fewer cattle were coming down from the mountain range each day. Down in the valley the herd of fat steers increased. In a very short time the big drive to Bear Paw would start.

Early one evening, two Open A

riders reported to Craig that a small herd of cattle had broken back on them in the screw pines. Both men were tired out.

"Aw, let 'em go," Craig said, "and you fellers hit for the chuck wagon. I'll take a pasear up that way and see if I can spot 'em. Seen anything of the little lady today?" The riders shook their heads.

That was the first time, since the start of the roundup, Rita Robinson had failed to put in an appearance. Craig had really missed her, and so had the riders. He had noticed that, from the way in which they had worked that day. Rita's presence had been the signal for them to show off, to ride hard and take wild chances, thus pushing the work ahead at a fast pace. But today their work had lacked that dash, the accustomed pep.

And Craig had been no different from the rest. All day his eyes had scanned the foothills, in the hope that he would catch a glimpse of the girl. He wondered what had detained her. He could not recall having said anything to her that might have savored of love, thus annoying her and accounting for her absence.

"Guess mebbe she's down at Bear Paw,' he surmised, "and havin' trouble gettin' the cattle cars."

He swung his horse around and headed back into the mountains. The trail he was following forked, and he pulled up his mount. He had been on the lookout for cattle tracks, but what he saw now were horse tracks, two sets of them. Curiosity prompted him to follow them.

He was presently aware of something peculiar about them. The tracks clearly showed that both horses had been galloping. Further along he noticed marks in the dust that had been left by a dragging rope. When the tracks finally came together they were blurred, as if one rider had milled around the other. The marks of the rope were missing now, but the deep indentations of a man's riding boots could be plainly seen.

After that, the tracks showed that both horses had slowed to a walk. Craig, looking around for cattle tracks and seeing none, became more and more intrigued. Who could have made those tracks? Certainly none of the Open A riders, for they had worked the other side of the hump all day.

The sun was all poised to drop behind the mountain range. A few minutes more and it had disappeared. A brief twilight ensued, during which time Craig clung to the tracks. They led him into rough country, slashed with coulees and washes, thick with screw pine and dwarf cedar. Then night fell like a blanket, but Craig kept on.

Finally he had to dismount and search for the tracks with a match. Strangely enough, that day the Open A riders had talked of rustlers. Perhaps, Craig thought, these were two lookout men from a gang, waiting their chance to pounce on the herd of fat stock in the valley below. You never could tell, and it paid to make sure.

Craig uttered an exclamation of surprise. As he studied the tracks in the feeble matchlight, a trampled blade of grass slowly straightened.

"Passed this way just a few minutes ago!" he cried. "Well, it's up to me to find out who they are and what they're after."

Darkness and still rougher country combined to make Craig's progress slow. His horse moved warily, and at last dipped over the lip of a draw, following the bed. The steep slopes pinched in abruptly, forming a narrow pass, through which the horse could barely squeeze. And just as abruptly, they receded.

Craig checked his mount, for he had caught sight of a spark of light ahead. He slipped from the saddle, left the horse ground tied, and walked ahead silently. The light took form, became a square, as he moved closer.

Craig knew what that square meant. A cabin window. Probably a line rider's cabin. But who would be in it at that time of night? That's what he determined to find out.

The champing of a bridle bit halted Craig. When he moved onward again, he was bent almost double, hand on his gun. He could see the outlines of the cabin now and a blur

in front of it, which he knew was a horse. Something moved next to it. A second horse! That accounted for the two sets of tracks.

The cabin door was closed, but the window was open. A man's voice reached out to Craig on the silent air, but he failed to recognize it. Now he knew he had been right about those tracks. Two men were inside the cabin. To what purpose?

Craig carefully circled the square of light cast on the ground by the window. Then the man spoke again, and Craig recognized the voice with a start. It belonged to Butch Baylor the discharged Open A foreman.

Craig stepped closer to the window, raised up, and peered through. There stood Butch all right, and he had been drinking. He was talking to someone, but Craig couldn't see who it was. So he listened intently and then he knew.

IT WAS Rita Robinson. She was there, in the cabin. But just where? The candle on the table guttered, throwing light into a corner of the cabin. Then Craig saw her, bound hand and foot, lying on a bunk, terror-striken.

"You fell in love with him and brung him back to the Open A," Butch was saying thickly. "I could see it in yore eyes when you looked at him. You, who was allus yowling about fellers making love to you! Blast you, you *wanted* somebody to make love to you, pervided he looked good to you! I ain't so purty as that new *jasper,* I'll allow, but I've forgot more about ranching than he'll ever know."

Rita's fear prevented a reply, which only seemed to exasperate the man.

"I've been watching you," he went on. "That's how I ketched you at the forks. Every day you've hung around him; couldn't keep away from him a minute. You eat him up with yore eyes. Batty over him, that's what you are. But you wasn't fooling nobody, 'cept yoreself.

"When we was on roundup last year, did you ever come around? I'll say you didn't. Oh, no. And why? 'Cause I wasn't good enough for you, I guess."

Butch pulled out a flask, drained it, and threw it on the floor.

"Well," he rasped, "I've got you where that Craig hombre can't rescue you, and I'm gonna keep you here till you agree to marry me. If it's cave-man stuff you want, I'll supply plenty of that."

The threat loosed the girl's tongue. "You can hold me here till I die, Butch," she declared, "but I'll never consent to marry you, you brute! You don't love me; you never did. All you want is the Open A and my stock."

"You're doggone tooting," Butch snarled, "and I'm gonna have it, too. You'll marry me, or I'll bust you flat, and then nobody'll wanna marry you. There's that herd of fat stock down in the valley. Every cent you've got it tied up in 'em. All I've gotto do is rustle 'em, and that'd settle you. And it'd be a cinch too, 'cause the Fletcher gang'd help me."

Craig pricked up his ears at that. The Fletcher gang's rotten reputation for rustling had traveled the length and breadth of the state. Abe Fletcher's cunning and knowledge of the range had kept his gang immune from the law for years.

Butch was speaking again. "Fletcher wanted me to go in cahoots with him afore—rustle yore stock. But I turned him down. If you won't marry me, I'll ride over to his hideout and tell him. It's close by here, in Sutler's Gulch. Then we'll clean you down to the last calf."

"Craig and the Open A riders might have something to say to that," Rita said defiantly.

"Craig?" Butch repeated with all the venom at his command. "The guy you're crazy about, huh? Well, we'll bump him off in a hurry. Now hustle up and make up yore mind. What's yore answer?"

Craig slipped around the corner of the cabin to the door, thumped on it, and then darted back to the open window. Butch froze in his tracks, then ripped out an oath, stepped to the door, flung it wide, gun in hand.

He jumped aside, waiting poised.

When no one entered, he peered out into the darkness, muttering. He waited a short time, then stepped back inside, and slammed the door. When he turned, he found himself facing Craig Canby.

"I've got you covered, Butch, so drop that gun!" Craig snapped. "Drop it!... Why, you fool—"

Butch's gun muzzle tilted upward against his hip. There followed a double roar in the narrow confines of the cabin. Butch's face assumed an expression of agony. He clapped both hands to his middle, and fell forward on the floor.

A shrill scream echoed from the bunk. Craig crossed over to Rita, gathered her up in his arms.

"You're all right, now," he assured her. "Sorry I had to kill him, but it was him and me for it." He quieted her down and then unloosed her bonds, "Let's get outa here, he suggested. "That thing on the floor ain't a pretty sight. Can you stand?"

She tried; but couldn't. The bonds had been too tight and the circulation had not yet been restored. So he placed her gently back on the bunk.

"Craig," she said presently, sobbing from the reaction, "you—you heard what that man said?"

"I heard a lotta whisky talkin', that's all," Craig grinned, trying to soothe her. "Let's skip it. How's the feet? Ready to track?"

The girl shook her head. "Craig," she asked. "did you—did you believe what Butch said—about me—and you?"

"Why, shore thing," Craig replied evasively. "I wouldn't put nothin' past that hombre. He's been in cahoots with the Fletcher gang, that's a cinch, Also, it's a swell break for me. He spilled the works when he gave away their hideout. With a bunch of riders behind me—"

"I didn't mean that, Craig. I meant the—the other things he said. You don't believe that, do you?"

"Well, little lady," Craig laughed, "what do *you* think?"

RITA SAT UP and looked at Craig. When their eyes met, the candlelight showed him something in the girl's that started his heart pounding. The next moment his arms were around her, his warm lips on hers.

"Rita, I love you!" Craig declared. "I've loved you since the moment we met. Whether you believe what Butch said or not, cuts no ice with me, honey. I'm tellin' you how I feel." Then he sobered suddenly. "Now, go ahead and fire me," he added.

"I never suspected anyone had guessed my secret. Craig," Rita told him in a low, happy voice. "It was love for me too—at first sight." She clung to him. "You can't leave me now, Craig! I won't let you go! Someone else can capture the Fletcher gang."

"Rita, darlin', I've *gotta* do it!" Craig cried. "It'll be a cinch. Besides, I've gotta clear the range of them thievin' coyotes. I took an oath I would!"

"You—took an—oath?" The words came slowly, wonderingly. "I don't understand, Craig. You mean—"

"Just this, honey," Craig interrupted. "I drifted into this country for just one purpose—to wipe out the Fletcher gang, not to be anybody's foreman. I'm a Stock Association detective, who got two big breaks—a sweet girl's love and the whereabouts of that gang. So, sweetness, I wasn't proposin' to the Open A. I was proposin' to *you*."

"And after you trap this Fletcher gang—what then, Craig?" the girl asked quickly.

"Then I'll resign, to make love to you," Craig promised.

THE END

NORTH-COUNTRY ★ MAN ★

by Mat Rand

Jack Gannon rebelled at being bound by the hatreds of a range-war that was over fifteen years ago!

IT WASN'T until he shoved a herd of steers out to the railroad and Grandbridge that Jack Gannon fully realized how outcast the stockmen who lived beyond the hills were. And it was a girl, a slim, black-haired little beauty, who made him realize it. She looked him over with an arrogance that angered him at once.

"Young feller, don't you go lettin' that red hair of yours get you into trouble out there in Grandbridge!" old Tobe, who, upon the death of Gannon's father and mother ten years before, had taken him under wing, had admonished. "You shove them dogies out an' then hightail for home right off. Us north-country ranchers ain't had much to do with the Grandbridge outfit since the big range war between us fifteen years ago. Bitterness ain't died down yet! You'll get into trouble out there an it'll be you against the whole country. I'm warnin' you! You got more ability fer gettin' into trouble than any nineteen-year-old I ever knowed, so watch yourself!"

Gannon drove the last of Tobe's steers into the freight corral and slammed the gate. In his pocket crinkled the check the buyer had given him a few minutes before—a check old Tobe badly needed, otherwise he'd never have even considered a drive into country he thought of as hostile. Gannon felt the girl's eyes upon him, with a cool, impersonal look. She was superintending the corralling of a herd of her own.

"You buyin' that bunch of steers, too?" Gannon asked the cattle buyer.

"Yeh. An' that's the last of the Harper herd!" the cattle buyer, a red-faced beefy man returned. "Thet girl there is Arlene Harper. Been runnin' her old man's ranch since he died a year back. Havin' tough goin' I hear. Anyway, she's sold all her stock, an' is plannin' to buy some herd cheap down south an' restock next year."

He rode off. Gannon, sneaking a look at Arlene Harper, found her plenty nice—slender form, but curved in the right places and outlined satisfactorily by the white blouse and grey riding-breeches she wore. There was a huge silk neckerchief about her throat, and a huge white hat on her head, and between Gannon glimpsed a button of a nose, but a firm line of chin that warned him. She was seventeen or eighteen, he decided. Just a kid, he thought with the superiority of another couple of years.

Upon impulse, he lifted his hat. Whereupon one of her riders swung on him and after giving him a hard look, asked her, "This gent annoyin' you, ma'am?"

Gannon heard her reply, "Don't bother. He's just a tramp from the north country!"

That burned Gannon. But he swal-

lowed his rage and replaced his worn hat on his fire-red hair. His blocky, medium-stature body clad in worn jeans and khaki shirt was tense, as tense as the stubborn outline of his sun-burnt jaw. The nerve of the kid! But he had it coming to him—this antagonism towards men of the north country was what old Tobe had warned him against. Without a look back, he galloped away.

HE DID not anticipate seeing her again, but he did nevertheless. Later in the afternoon, on the main street of Grandbridge. Gannon had fully intended to obey old Tobe's warning and start for home at once, but the busy cowtown with its crowded main street lured him, and he lingered, most of the time on the outskirts of a group of riders who, their tongues loosened with whiskey, were relating their horsemanship exploits. One in particular attracted Gannon's attention—a big, middle-aged man whose hair was thinned from hardship or dissipation and whose red, unshaven face was brutal. He boasted loudly of his ability with a lariat, and to back up his contention swung a loop about him.

"Yo're good, Pondera!" someone applauded.

"Shore I'm good! I—" Pondera began, when Arlene Harper passed by. She walked with a free, graceful stride that reminded Gannon of some wild thing. All the riders fell back from her, in deference, and most of them removed their hats. Not so Pondera. With a laugh, he flipped out his rope, looped it about the girl's ankles, and hauled it tight, so that she was brought to a halt.

Jack Gannon saw fear in her eyes, then, though her lips smiled stiffly. She said, "Please take that rope off, Pondera!"

"Haw! Haw! Got you hog-tied now, girlie, an' I'm keepin' you that-a-way until I get good an' ready to let you go!"

Something went thru Gannon, and he shook as with an ague, while ice drained along his veins. He knew what caused this—that hopeless, weary look in her eyes, like the look in the eyes of a trapped antelope! Gannon forgot how shed scorned him back at the corral, and he forgot the contempt with which she'd remarked that he was from the north country. His voice, startlingly hard for one of his years, rasped out harshly.

"You heard what the lady said, Pondera! Take that rope off!"

Gannon's hand dropped to his hip. No gun there; he'd had the forethought to leave it with his saddle. His temper was raging beyond control now, and if he'd had it, likely it would have come into action.

Pondera swung around to face him. His broad, red face expressed surprise, then anger.

"Who're you?" he barked.

"That ain't the question! Are you takin' that rope off, or—"

Gannon didn't wait to finish. He snatched the rope from Pondera's hand, and swung it free of Arlene's ankle. Then ducked the fist which Pondera swung at him. The big man roared a curse and came forward, arms flailing. He was a head taller than Gannon, but what the lad lacked in size he made up for with fury.

He bored in, swinging a dozen blows for every one of Pondera's, and the big man's face presently began to take on the appearance of a piece of raw beef. But when his blows did land on Gannon, they were rock-crushing, killing—twice Gannon went down into the street, knocked a dozen feet, but each time he was up instantly.

Someone yelled out, "Thet's the kid who brought in some cows from the north country today. North-country man!" And instantly whatever sympathy Gannon had had, vanished at once. Even he, in the heat of the fight, sensed it. There would be no one to exult with him if he won; no one to be sorry if he lost. He glimpsed Arlene where she'd drawn back, and he had only time to note that there was horror in her face before he ducked another blow. Horror, but no sympathy. Yet he was fighting for her!

And, stubbornly, the thought that she was not appreciative was the extra spur he needed to drive him in

to finish Pondera. He backed the big man into a corner and began to pound him unmercifully. Then a hand caught his arm and jerked him away, so violently that he sprawled out into the street where he'd been knocked twice. This time he didn't get up so quickly, for a man with a gun in his hand was menacing him.

"Easy, you coyote! What do you mean, beatin' up one of my men? I've got an idea that you'd look well in a coffin!"

A tall, thin man with long face and thin lips. Lips without mercy, Gannon thought. His temper began to cool, and he took stock of his new antagonist at once. A dangerous man with a snake-in-the-grass appearance his smooth cheeks and carefully-barbered little mustache couldn't conceal. He was overdressed in riding clothes that contrasted to his disadvantage with the stained work-garments of the cowboys.

"He had it comin' to him!" Gannon said sullenly, getting slowly to his feet.

"Wall, I'm Turk Britell, an' I don't aim to let my hands get beat up by strangers, especially north country strangers!' Britell said crisply.

"It was a fair enough fight, Turk!" someone said.

There was no sympathy in the voice, but it seemed to express the sentiment of the majority of the watchers, and this Turk Britell evidently sensed, for at once he sheathed his gun, and with a contemptuous sneer said, "All right, northlander! I'll let you go! But fork your horse an' hightail it out of this man's town, or you'll regret it!"

Gannon stared at the faces which ringed him in. No hope there, anywhere! And his temper, under the significance of this, cooled, though as he passed Britell in his retreat there was a momentary flare which he was hard put to control. The overdressed man with the little mustache followed him a few yards.

"An' don't come back!" he threatened.

"Don't worry!" Gannon returned bitterly, "I ain't comin' back—"

He saw Arlene Harper come thru the crowd, and halt there, within her eyes a look he couldn't fathom. Not contempt, certainly. His heart leaped, surged, until he found difficulty in breathing due to the tightness inside him. He lifted his hat and bowed in the manner old Tobe had taught him.

"Anyway, Miss Harper, thet Pondera won't go around ropin' you right away!" he said.

HE WAITED for some kind word from her. And it never came. Instead, she took a step forward, to link her arm thru Turk Britell's, while she said in a queer, tight voice, "You're a beast! I think Turk should have shot you! Beating up poor Pondera like that!"

It seemed to Gannon that a red-hot knife thrust thru him. He'd expected some expression of gratitude, at least. Instead, she condemned him for what he'd done for her! Red fury surged thru him once more, so that the crowd and Turk Britell and the girl and the beaten Pondera swayed in a crimson haze. But he held himself sternly. He turned and hurried off, pausing only to lash out, "Yeh, Britell, it'll be a long, long time before I come back here again!"

His fury persisted when he reached the feed-yard where he'd left his horse, but it had diminished to a cold throb of vengeance—and pain. Pain because the girl had scorned him. He tried to put her out of his mind, tried to forget her, but it was no use.

He strapped his gun about his hips, and hefted the weapon a couple of times. He'd never killed a man, though often he'd wanted to. Old Tobe had made him swear, long ago, never to take a human life except in defense. So reluctantly he put the worn Colt which had been his father's back into the holster, though it was his desire to blast Turk Britell so thoroughly that he'd float. He saddled, mounted, and rode for the hills.

The feed-yard where he'd stabled his horse had been on the side of town opposite the hills, so that he was compelled to ride the length of

the main street, past the scene of Pondera's defeat. And something happened he was afraid might happen—he saw Arlene Harper. She was entering the Sundown hotel, where evidently she was staying. And behind her was Turk Britell. The sun was just going down, and dusk was creeping over the town, so that Britell was inside shadows that gave to him a swarthy air of danger. Gannon's hand dropped to his gun, then raised with fingers empty but so tightly clutched that they hurt.

The girl didn't look around. She disappeared as did Britell, and Gannon continued the length of the street and into the prairie beyond. A couple of men stared at him and one said something to the other, who laughed so loudly that Gannon could detect the jeer in the laughter. He surmised he was the butt of some coarse joke. North-country men! They were even more despised here in Grandbridge than he'd thought.

He rode out upon the lonely prairie, heading his horse for the low range of hills that made a jagged skyline in the north. Presently night came and then a full moon swam up into a cloudless, still sky. The air took on the chill of the prairie night, but Jack Gannon failed to feel it; he burned all over from fury, and sweat was pouring out on him so that his clothes were soaked. He didn't try to hold his temper, now.

Then suddenly the urge to return, to even things with Turk Britell, to show Arlene Harper how absolutely he held her in contempt, was too much, and Jack Gannon spun his horse around and headed back for Grandbridge. He'd show them that, in spite of the odds, a north-country man was better than the whole pack of polecats who inhabited that town! He'd show Turk Britell and Arlene Harper! He forgot old Tobe's warning in the red fury that sawed thru him. He put his horse to a dead run, and in a short while was again in Grandbridge, his fury evident, his eyes wild, so wild that when he dismounted before the Sundown hotel a knot of men gathered in the entrance gave way precipitately.

Inside, the clerk behind the desk cowered, and when Gannon thundered at him, "What room's Arlene Harper got?" he quavered his answer. A red-headed demon, Gannon went up the steps to the second floor three at a time. He didn't stop to think why he sought out Arlene at once; he took it for granted that where he'd find her he'd find Turk Britell, for he had seen the two of them entering the Sundown together. And he wanted to see the two of them together.

He wasn't mistaken in thinking that he'd find them together. The door of Arlene's room was open, and thru it Gannon could see her, slumped in a chair with what appeared to be legal papers in her lap, while near her Turk Britell stood. Again Gannon was struck by what he decided was Arlene's hopelessness. But what had she to be hopeless about? He felt triumphant that, for some reason, her arrogance was gone.

But the quality wasn't gone from Britell. He was smoking a cigarette, and there was a smile of peculiar triumph on his lips.

"Well, you haven't got much choice, Arlene!" he was saying. "No choice at all! You do as I say, savvy that? While I'm livin'—"

"You ain't liable to be, much longer!" Gannon snarled, stepping inside the room.

Arlene gasped, and jerked to her feet swiftly. Gannon stared at her steadily for a minute, until he was conscious that Britell's hand had dropped to his gun; but in the girl's eyes had not come any contempt, but rather a relief. When Britell's hand touched his gun, Gannon swung on him.

"Watch yore step, Britell! I'm plenty willin' to throw lead!"

"So you came back!" Britell said, his lips twisted into a smile that wasn't a smile at all, but more a contortion of his face, "I thought I told you to head out of here an' stay away! Why'd you come back?'

"To beat yore head off!" Gannon snapped.

HE TOOK a step forward. Fury had taken away that little caution he'd ever had, and now with a reckless gesture he thrust his gun into its holster and jabbed forward with his free hand. His fist contacted with Britell's jaw, and the sleek man tumbled over back. Gannon, oblivious for the minute of the girl, was upon him like a wildcat.

But not for long. His attack turned his back towards the door, and suddenly there loomed from the hallway a man—a big man who went for his gun the instant he comprehended what was taking place. Gannon jerked out his Colt. The two guns boomed together; Gannon felt wind by his ear, heard the shock of lead thudding into the wall beside him. But his attacker, with a howl, dropped his gun and staggered back, nursing his numbed right hand from which the Colt had been shot.

"Come in here, you!" Gannon commanded.

The man, his eyes dangerous, shambled forward. Britell got to his feet, and began nervously to adjust his torn clothes, at the same time that he snapped out, "You fool, Runn! If you ain't any faster than that, you deserve to get shot!"

"Boss, he was lucky, that's all!" Runn declared. "Jest lucky!"

"Wall, northlander? What now? Yuh can't very well lick the two of us!" Britell asked, "Yo're foolish, kid! Git out before yuh get hurt! We don't monkey with kids much in this town! What you back here for, anyway?"

"I'll tell you!" Gannon heard himself say, between his teeth. "You thought you could handle me like a kid! You pulled a gun on me when I licked one of your men! You couldn't see him take a lickin', could you? An'—an' I come back to show Arlene Harper that I got nerve enough to buck this whole town!"

He turned on her, savagely, "Yuh looked at me down at the corral just as if I was mud!" he said slowly. "Then I licked Pondera because he was insultin' you, if ever I saw a girl insulted. An' you took his side after it was all over with! I figured I could do somethin' that'd not make you look at me as if I was mud, an' I thought I saw that chance in lickin' Pondera! But I reckon not! I —I wish you was a man—I'd knock yore head off!"

"Kid, thet red hair of yores certainly shows a temper!" Runn declared, with a light note. Too light. Gannon glanced around. The smile on the man's lips was of amusement; the sullen menace was gone from his eyes. He seemed almost cheerful, and Gannon should have been warned, but in his fury he was never warned.

"Why—I—" the girl gasped, in answer to his accusation. Her cheeks were white.

"Wall, I've had my say! An' I'm goin' to lick the two of you, you Britell an' you, Runn! Britell, throw that Colt down under the bed!'

"Wall, yo're plenty ferocious!" Britell said, and now he, too, was laughing. "But you north-country hombres always was blood-thirsty. Used to ride down here an' shoot us in the back, rustlin' cattle an' carryin' off some of our women. I reckon some of the women was plenty glad to go with 'em, but they took 'em by force!"

"That's a lie! The north-country men never made war on women! The only women who rode back with them were those whose sweethearts were north-country men!"

At the indignation in his voice, Britell shrugged. "Have it yore own way!" he said. "Only I thought mebby you might be startin' a one-man war again, shootin' us an' ridin' off with our women!"

He jerked his head towards the girl. "Arlene, you better be gettin' scared!" he advised lightly. "This hombre is goin' to carry you off beyond the hills!"

The jeering contempt of him! Gannon heard his voice return, "Mebby I will!" and then he saw himself in a mirror beyond Britell—a mirror hung so that Gannon could see both himself and the door in it. He saw a white-faced kid with flaming red hair, and back of him, in the doorway, two men with drawn guns, and

he understood now why Runn and Britell had ceased to fear him. They stood in such a position that they were able to see the door.

"Mebby I will take her back with me!" Gannon repeated.

He flung up his gun. It crashed once, and the lamp on the table shattered and the wick was snuffed out, leaving the room in dark. Gannon swung his gun towards the door. It blazed twice, and a man cried out sharply. Lead hummed in the air. The men in the doorway, the one who had cried out evidently only slightly wounded, were blazing away, and for a time the room was an inferno of thunder, powdersmoke, and dancing blazes.

Then Gannon groped his way forward until he felt the girl beside him. His left hand darted out, to fix upon her arm. The coolness of Britell had angered him more than anything else—a coolness backed up by the knowledge that men with guns covered the room from the doorway! Britell's voice rang in his memory. Especially the part about riding off with Arlene Harper. Well, he'd do just that! He'd take her with him. he'd show them he could do that! And after he had left town and eluded his pursuers, he'd send her back to Britell. He'd make a monkey of Britell, all right—taking his girl from right under his nose and then sending her back to him!

The flesh of her sleeveless forearm burned his palm like fire, but he hauled her roughly after him.

"You're comin' with me!" he hissed. "Don't make a fuss, or I'll get rough! I'll show Britell I can take his girl!"

He'd expected a furious show of resistance, and was surprised when there was none. Too scared even to fight back, he thought. She, who had looked at him as if he were merely mud in the corral! She had no nerve; any north-country woman would have fought tooth and nail.

HE EDGED to the door, leading her behind him. The guards in the hallway still banged into the dark, but warily, pausing after each

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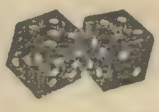

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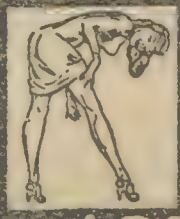

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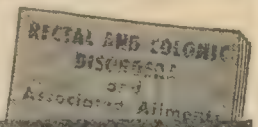

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shot to listen. Gannon bumped into someone. He thought it was Runn, though he could not be sure. Instantly he released the girl, to smash his fist into the other's face and down him. Then his hand swung back to grab Arlene again. She hadn't moved, and once more he was faintly surprised.

The man falling made a commotion, and together the two guards opened up. Evidently they thought the sound was caused by Gannon. And under the confusion Gannon ducked through the doorway. He raced down the hall, with the girl after him. At the head of the stairs he paused to look back, but he was not being followed.

"They figger I'm still in the room!" he said aloud.

There was a mob of men outside the hotel, attracted by the shots in the room upstairs. At sight of Jack Gannon, flourishing his gun in one hand and hauling the girl in the other, they fell back.

"Easy there, boys!" Gannon called warningly, "Don't nobody stick his nose into this affair! He's liable to get it chopped off with lead!"

His horse was at the hitching post, and swiftly Gannon unlooped the reins. He motioned to another horse which had been tethered beside his mount, and snapped out to Arlene. "Ride that horse! Untie him an' give me the reins! You ride right alongside me! An' don't try to get away!"

"Y-yes!" she gasped.

He didn't dare look at her directly, but from the corner of his eye he watched her untie the horse and mount. Then with the reins of both animals in his left hand, he climbed into the saddle and pulled away.

And just in time. Britell and Runn came pounding down the stairs, to burst out through the door of the hotel. Close behind them were the guards. At sight of Gannon and the girl riding off in the moonlight they set up an uproar.

"Get 'em!" Gannon heard Britell scream. "Get me a horse, somebody! Where's Pondera?"

One of his men sent a shot after the fugitives. It whined wide of its mark, but the lonely sound of it

somehow served to cool Gannon's temper a little, and to bring to him full realization of what he'd done. Kidnapped Turk Britell's girl in a country where he had no friends! Then his fury tempered rapidly, and by degrees a chill of premonition crept over him.

Presently he pulled to a halt, to peer back. He gave a grunt of relief when he detected no pursuers. He turned to the girl.

"Wall, I reckon you're free!" he said slowly. "You can ride back to your sweetheart now, I reckon! I just took you with me to give him a scare!" His voice hardened. "In case he don't know it, tell him he's been made a plumb fool of! I could jest as well take you back to my country over the hills, but I'm sendin' you back to Turk Britell!"

He flung the reins of Arlene's horse to her. But she didn't make a move to ride away. Nor did she seem particularly frightened. Instead, she sat very still, her body moving only upon the impulse of the uneasy horse, and stared at him with a look that was disconcerting.

"Wall, ride back!" Gannon commanded impatiently, but due to the surge of his heart his voice sounded weakly in his ears.

"And what if I told you I didn't want to go back?"

"You mean—you ain't sore at me for takin' you away from Britell?" Gannon demanded, thunderstruck.

"Listen, I'm sorry for something!" said the girl swiftly. "I'm sorry that I thought of you in the way I did down at the corral! I—"

There was the thunder of hoofs. A pair of horsemen burst over the prairie. Gannon didn't wait—he knew what was in store for him, well enough, if they should catch him. He swung around and streaked away. He had faith in the speed of his horse, and he turned the animal's head towards the distant hills, dim in the moon-glow. He was riding out of hostile country, out of Grandbridge country, out of the life of Arlene Harper.

Then, to right and left and before him, horsemen emerged into view.

[*Turn Page*]

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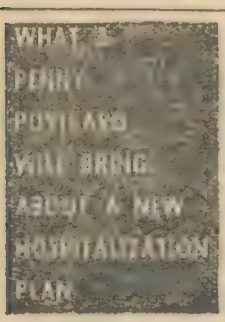

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Evidently they had ridden to surround him .His heart sank. Thoughts of the future, now, weren't very pleasant; his mouth was suddenly dry, and it grew dryer yet when the horsemen converged upon him and hemmed him in.

This individual rode forward. It was Pondera. His face was evil, exultant.

"Thought you'd get away, eh? Wall, we got you now! An' we're takin' you back to Grandbridge an' settlin' you fer good!"

Turk Britell rode up, and Runn, still nursing his hand, and the two guards in the doorway. Also a dozen other men, but Britell and his followers were the ones who hemmed Gannon in and forced him back to town. Britell seemed to pay no attention to Arlene, who lagged in the rear of the party, but Gannon flung cautious looks at her at intervals, and was amazed to see that she was crying.

They came to a halt under a gaunt pine tree, where a still larger party had gathered. Gannon didn't grasp the significance of the position at once; then with a slow surge of ice along his veins he noted that one gnarled limb of the tree had been rubbed bare upon one spot, and to that same spot clung a weather-beaten knot of rope. A hangman's tree! Gannon had expected to be beaten unmercifully, perhaps almost to death—but he hadn't foreseen hanging!

BUT HE MET it like a man. He compressed his lips. Already he could feel the bite of hemp into his throat.

"Wall, we got him!" Runn exulted. "The sneakin' kidnapper! An' I reckon he'll get what he deserves! What do you figure, men?"

There was a mutter of approval, but a few voices made all the noise. For the most part, the onlookers were silent. Gannon got the impression that they neither approved nor disapproved. But the enthusiastic ones made up for their silent companions.

"Shore! Hang him! He can't go treatin' our women like that!"

A rope made its appearance, and

flipped up over the branch. A loop dropped around Gannon's throat. His mouth was dry as dust, and he had intense difficulty in swallowing. But even in this moment his thoughts were for old Tobe; the check in his pocket, which Tobe needed, and which he must see Tobe would get before they lashed his horse out from under him and left him swinging in the air.

"All right, kid!" Turk Britell leered, "I warned yuh not to monkey around! You won't do any more foolin' in Grandbridge, especially with Turk Britell!"

Then the girl shoved her horse forward and cried out shrilly. "Stop! Listen, all of you!"

"Get back, Arlene!" Pondera warned, "This ain't fer you to see!"

"Maybe not! But I'm not talking to you!" the girl flashed. She appealed to the crowd. "Listen! You're hanging this man for kidnapping! But he isn't a kidnapper! I went with him willingly!"

"What's thet?" someone, hitherto silent, demanded.

"I went with him willingly! That doesn't make him a kidnapper, does it? Do they hang you, some of you men, whenever your sweethearts ride out with you?"

"Arlene! Shut up!" Britell rasped.

Gannon waited, more surprised than anything else. Why should she want to save him? He'd kidnapped her deliberately, taken her with him against her will. It was a puzzle—a puzzle he might never solve, for the rope between his neck and the bare limb was very tight now, and Britell looked upon the point of quirting the horse.

If nobody had spoken for an instant, he might have, but a voice boomed out, "I reckon we ain't got reason to doubt the word of thet little girl! She says she ain't been kidnapped. Then what's this hangin' for?"

Gannon saw Britell dart a look at Runn and Pondera. A look of baffled bewilderment and fury. Pondera cursed audibly in disappointment. But Runn, rising in his stirrups and

[*Turn Page*]

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bellowing out so that his voice drowned the buzz of conversation in the mob, yelped, "This ain't fer kidnappin'! This is for horse thievin'! This hombre here told Arlene Harper to take thet horse she's ridin'! Some of you saw her take it! Wall, thet horse don't belong to him, an' I reckon him tellin' her to take it was a plain case of horse stealin'! She prob'ly figgered he owned it! He's a horse thief, all right!"

There was an instant mutter, and Gannon's hope, for an instant flaming, died down again. Horse stealing was the blackest crime of this country. Horse stealing by a north-country man— Memories of range war flared, and they howled for blood.

"Horse thief he is! String him up!"

Turk Britell raised his quirt over the horse's flank. Another instant and it would descend, forcing the animal to bolt forward. The saddle was full now, but it would be empty then, and the man who filled it now would swing in mid air. Jack Gannon tensed himself, hoping that death would be quick, and sorry that he couldn't get old Tobe's check to him.

"Stop, Britell! Stop, or I'll kill you!"

The girl wasn't pleading now, because she'd jerked a gun from the holster of one of the men and was menacing Britell with it. The slick man backed a step, fear patent in his gesture. Arlene rode forward beside Gannon, and swinging the gun to include the whole crowd, threatened, "I'll do some shooting if any of you makes a dangerous move!"

The furious mutter that had followed the accusation of horse thief diminished, and there was silence while Arlene worked at Gannon's ropes to free him. The moment they were free he snatched Brittell's gun from his holster.

"All of you, listen!" the girl cried sharply, "This man is no more a horse thief than a kidnapper! That's just the excuse Britell and his outfit is using in order to get rid of him! I took that horse from the hotel! You understand? And I knew it wasn't mine! But I was borrowing it! Runn

twisted that to make it look as if it was horse stealing! Well, if it was, I'm a horse thief!"

She paused for breath, then rushed on, "I'm riding out with this man! I warn you, if you follow there'll be trouble!"

"Arlene, yo're crazy!" Britell rasped.

"Perhaps I've been crazy but I'm sane now, Turk! I mean what I say!"

"But you can't go with a north-country man!" Britell expostulated. He appealed to the mob. "String him up! He's a horse thief, all right! This girl's just lyin'! Go on, string him up!"

Someone muttered, "I ain't doin' any stringin'—not with them guns lookin' at me! Besides, I reckon this ain't my affair. Personally I don't figger any north-country man is worth even wastin' powder on, but still, this ain't my affair!"

He drifted away, and instantly others followed, until the mob had thinned. It was the moment Gannon had been waiting for. He spun his horse around and headed for the prairie, followed close by the girl. Except to glance at her, he didn't look back for pursuers until he'd covered a couple of miles, and then he pulled up, to spy three riders hot on the trail.

"Britell an' Runn an' Pondera, I reckon!" he exclaimed. "You figger there'll be more?"

ARLENE returned, "I don't think so. The men knew what I was saying was true. They're pretty fair in Grandbridge, even if they don't care much for north-country men!" She laughed a little. This isn't any of their affair. But Britell and those two partners of his—that's different!"

"Wall, we'll ride fer it!"

But deliberately he lagged behind. He wasn't finished with Britell—not yet! He was cold now, no temper, but filled with the fierce desire to throw lead.

"Ride ahead!' he called.

"But what—" Arlene began to ask, pulling up.

[*Turn Page*]

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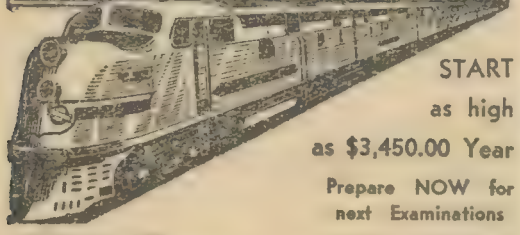

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"Ride ahead!" Gannon repeated, and after one look at his unsmiling face Arlene obeyed.

A gun boomed from the pursuers. Gannon felt his horse falter, stumble, and he went sliding out of the saddle. The animal limped a few steps, then fell and struggled, evidently hard hit. It stiffened at once.

A few yards away the trio pulled up. Three guns flaming now! But Gannon waited coldly, and with deadly accuracy. Runn jerked convulsively, then slipped from the saddle. Britell and Pondera hit the ground at once, bellying into the high buffalo grass. But Gannon had noted the position of Pondera, and when the man lifted himself on hands and knees to crawl, he fired at him. The bullet struck right under his nose, mining into the ground with force that erupted a cloud of dust into Pondera's face. He jerked fully upright, then, and came running towards Gannon. He followed a zig-zag course that made him a difficult target.

But Gannon shot him.

There was the sound of hoofs at Gannon's back. He jerked around, and his heart leaped into his throat when he saw Arlene. He fairly dragged her from the horse and down into the grass beside him.

"Why'd you come back? Britell's out there! He might shoot you!"

"I—I had to come! I thought you might get hurt!"

Then suddenly she seemed to collapse. She leaned against him, sobbing and talking brokenly.

"I—I'm sorry about the way I looked at you down at the corral! And the way I had to act after the fight with Pondera, when you'd fought for me! You see, Britell loaned father a lot of money, secured by the ranch, and when father died I—I couldn't pay the notes. And I'd promised father I'd fight to the last ditch before I let anyone have the ranch. Britell promised to extend the time of the notes. But he kept playing with me—promising one day to extend the time, and the next threatening to foreclose! But I hoped he'd

extend the time. I had to be nice to him. And when you licked Pondera and he stopped the fight with a gun, I—I had to play up to him, because I was afraid I might offend him! And when Pondera roped me by the ankle, I couldn't tell him what I thought of him, either, because he and Britell were pals!"

Gannon didn't look at her, though he was intently listening.

"Then tonight Britell wanted to marry me. I hated him! He offered to tear up the notes if I'd marry him. Those papers I had on my lap when you broke in tonight were the notes. I—I hated him so much I couldn't go through that, even for the ranch! I was desperate. I determined to run away, though I knew he'd try to prevent me. And when you broke in, I saw my chance!"

"I thought it was funny you didn't fight me!"

"I came of my own free will. And I didn't lie to those men in the mob. I'd have taken that horse even if you hadn't told me to! Every word I told the mob was true—"

Gannon crushed her to the ground and jerked to his feet. He took a dozen running steps to one side. At the same instant Turk Britell pulled himself upright out of the grass.

Two guns flamed together. Two golden streaks in the moonlight. Gannon heard death whine by him. But Turk Britell cried out as lead took him in the ribs, lifted him from his feet and toppled him forward upon his gun.

"Wall, you don't need to hate Britell any more!" Gannon said. "He's beyond hatin'!"

HE LIFTED the girl to her feet. For the first time she was in his arms, clinging to him, while his heart surged until it seemed ready to burst. Against the horizon he could see the hills.

"I reckon old Tobe'll be surprised when he sees what I'm bringin home!" he told her. "Mebby he won't like you for a while, because you're from the south, but he can't help likin' you after a while! An' we'll run yore ranch out here the way your dad wanted it run, but we'll live in the north country, beyond the hills!"

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BRIDGER'S TALL STORIES

True Fact Feature

by The Lawdog

JIM BRIDGER the celebrated hunter, trader, and guide was a mountain man. He was one of the few men who had visited the region we know today as Yellowstone Park. His first trip to that locality dated back to 1830. He tried to get his descriptions of this wonderland before the public. But alas, no newspaper or magazine would publish his tales. The trouble was that at times Jim Bridger told stories that seemed to be "tall tales". The editor of a leading western paper stated in 1879 that Bridger had told him of the Yellowstone wonders fully thirty years before. He prepared an article from Bridger's descriptions and then suppressed it. Why? Because as the editor stated, "a man who claimed to know Bridger told him he would be laughed out of town if he printed any of old Jim Bridger's lies." This editor finally did publicly apologize to Bridger for having doubted his statements.

Yet one can sympathize with the editor. People were repeating and enjoying Bridger's tall tales. The classic relates to the celebrated Obsidian Cliff in the Park. Its discovery by Bridger took place on one of his hunting trips. Coming one day in sight of a magnificent elk, he took careful aim at the unsuspecting animal and fired. To his amazement the elk not only was not wounded but seemed not even to have heard the shot. Bridger took careful aim again and fired. Utterly exasperated, he seized his rifle by the barrel and resolved to use it as a club. Rushing madly toward the elk he suddenly crashed into an immovable vertical wall which proved to be a mountain of perfectly transparent glass. On the farther side of it the elk was quietly grazing in peaceful security. Stranger still, the mountain was not only of pure glass, but was a perfect telescopic lens and the elk that seemed to be only a few hundred feet away was really twenty-five miles away!

There was another story connected with Bridger that matched this elk tall tale. Opposite a certain camping ground where he frequently would rest there was the bald flat face of a mountain. But it was far, far away. Now Bridger knew the time interval it would take for an echo to return to the spot where a person shouted anything. The problem was how to get exactly six hours sleep. Bridger calculated it would take the echo just six hours to return to that exact spot. So before retiring to bed at night, he would shout at the top of his lungs, "Time to Get up!" Then he would fall into slumberland and never worry about whether or not the perfect man made alarm clock had been invented. For exactly six hours later, to the second, the echo would return in the morning and shout, "Time to Get up!"

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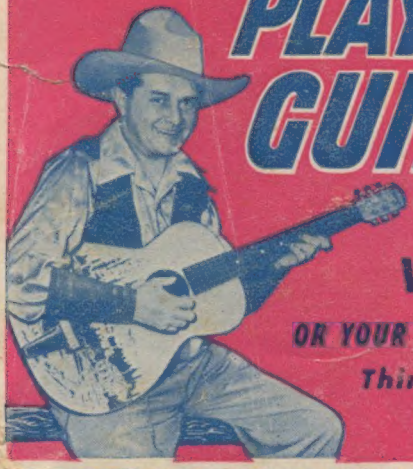

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★EXPERIENCED GUITAR PLAYERS have told me Bob West's "PICTURE METHOD" improves their playing tremendously and is ideal for beginners. Don't envy friends who are so popular because they play a musical instrument. LEARN TO PLAY THE GUITAR and hold the spotlight at parties, entertainments, or gatherings of friends. You will be amazed at how easy it is to learn to play the Guitar, even if you can't read a note of music.

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